Cast of Characters

**Nick Strode** - The protagonist of the story. He’s a football player on scholarship at the university and the best athlete in the history of his small-town high school. In spite of his celebrity he always takes care of his best friend Brooks Holman.

**Brooks Holman** – The egghead narrator of the story. He attends the university on Nick’s coattails and reluctantly pursues a career in medicine. He’s fascinated with women but inexperienced, and he constantly struggles with an almost perpetual state of arousal. He tells the story of his best friend.

**Margaret** - The old drunken cook of the Sigma Tau House. She is a philosopher and purveyor of truth although she is never appreciated for that. She has a soft spot for Nick, and is the only person in the house who understands him. She has the uncanny ability to maintain an incredibly long ash on her cigarette

**Leslie Cantrell** - A poor girl with a mysterious past whom is irresistibly attractive to both Nick and Brooks. They both fall for her, but Nick gets there first. She has a slightly crooked front tooth.

**The River** - A never-ending and unstoppable force of nature. A metaphor.

**The House** - The Sigma Tau House, an oasis between adolescence and adulthood.

**Minor characters**

**Annette** - A sexy high school classmate of Brooks and Nick.

**Mitchell** - A small town kid who befriends Brooks at college during rush. He manages to stay in school with street smarts and savvy. He drives a customized Rambler with a mystery engine and never reveals his first name

**John Pursell** – He’s as big as a barn door with muscles as hard as boilerplate; an All-American defensive end on the football team and the president of the Sigma Tau house. He’s a natural leader.

**Crasher** - One of Nick’s best friends and a regular in the TV room. He’s beanpole thin and wears thick glasses.

**Big Wally** - A slacker who always has a dumb-looking grin on his face. He’s a regular in the TV room.

**Booby** - A lady’s man with long hair and a mustache. He can drink beer faster and longer than anybody else in The House. He’s a regular in the TV room.

**Cougar** - An upper classman who is the house steward. He is the hairiest guy in the house, maybe in the whole world.

**Cowgirl** - A redheaded, raw-boned, and wild-eyed sophomore girl from the sorority next door. She’s tougher than half the guys in the Sigma Tau House.
Dudley – A shy upper classman with a quiet dry wit. He’s a regular in the TV room and speaks so quietly that no one can hear him.

Herbie - A steady reliable freshman. He’s a pledge brother of Brooks.

Maxwell - The token religious guy who frequently slips over to the dark side. He’s a hypocrite, who maintains a never-ending quest to meet a good virgin Christian girl.

Moose - An upper classman who constantly spits tobacco into a Styrofoam cup. He’s a regular in the TV room.

Scott Morris - A regular in the TV room. He idolizes the TV character Tony Baretta.

Ashleigh Pierce - A member of the Kappa sorority who sees the potential in Brooks. She comes from a rich family and is the most beautiful girl on campus.

The Big Dodge - Brooks’ 1958 Dodge. It has a collection of mechanical malfunctions that defy logical explanation.

The Faceman - A rich, pretty-boy from California. He drives a Camaro and thinks he’s a ladies man.

The Phantom - An unknown and age-less member who occasionally leaves a surprise at the Sigma Tau House.

Trapper - A pledge brother of Brooks. He wears flannel shirts and has thick dark eyebrows that join together in the middle of his forehead … a monobrow.

Poopsie - A regular in the TV room. He’s a Pre Med major who’s lazy but smart. He has the ability to fart on demand.

Woody - An upper classman who is an anatomical freak and impossible to wake up in the morning. He’s a regular in the TV room

Zeke - A pledge brother of Brooks. He owns the best stereo in The House.

Jim Fitzpatrick - The football coach at the university.

Michael Ruas - A street fighter who has a partially paralyzed eyelid. He’s a predator … the toughest guy in the world.

The Redneck - A beer-bellied redneck from out of town.
House Rules

1
Downstream

I pushed The Big Dodge hard around the curves on the two-lane blacktop that ran with the river. We’d left the wheat fields behind us and now it was just the car and myself moving along with the river as if connected to it by an invisible force. The water moved like a big serpent, slithering back and forth from the road to the prairie in broad green arcs of movement that tantalized me each time they came close. Watching the river along this part of the road almost hypnotized me. It had been that way ever since I could remember.

I’d been to its origin just once. I was eleven years old and hiking with a troop of marauding boy scouts. We’d been forced to climb up into the mountains in the western part of the state carrying our wooden-framed packs on a death march under the watchful eye of our Gestapo scoutmaster. We walked up three thousand vertical feet that day, and by the time we got to the top I was too tired to even bitch about it. I remember plodding along with all of the others. My head was down, and all I could think about was putting one foot in front of the other until we stopped to the sound of his voice.

"Everybody take a good look!" he shouted from his spot at the front of the line. "This is the birthplace of The Big River."

We stood in silence and listened to his voice echo off the granite boulders that surrounded us. He sighed and then he said:

"Most people will never know it."

I wondered what he meant as I looked around us. We stood in an alpine meadow surrounded by snow capped peaks and small trickles of water ran through the moss and stone beneath our boots. The water coalesced like spider webs to mark the beginnings of the big river. It didn't look like much and I wondered how something so big could start out so small. But as I watched a drop of sweat fall from my forehead and join the headwaters of the river I saw signs of the power that was at lower elevations. The tiny creeks had left narrow troughs in the granite. What the fluid lacked in volume, it made up for with persistence ... millennia of persistence.
I remembered the sound of the water trickling off the boulders in the meadow that day as I backed off the accelerator and felt the brakes pull against the force of the river. I coasted to a stop at the crossroads ... the biggest one of my life.

"It's time," I said to myself. "I can't put it off any longer."

There were two signs at the crossroads. One was labeled east and the other labeled west. I knew what waited for me at the end of the western interstate. If I followed that road my life might look just like the water that passed in front of me now. It grew wide and lazy as it rolled back and forth through the dark black earth. It acted as if it deserved a rest after it's long journey ... as if it enjoyed the scenery.

The house was at the end of the western interstate. Zoophysiology was there, along with histology, vertebrate morphology, and physics. Raunch dinners lay to the west too, mixed with pledge dances, waters fights, and senior rules. The phantom, as timeless as the river, would be at the end of the western exit too, waiting to astound a new class of freshmen.

But most importantly, she was to the west. The thought of being close to her almost made me abandon the east. It almost made me point the car down the western exit and floor it. But a life of second thoughts would come with her ... a life of "what ifs?" so I looked back at the river.

It collected more water as it traveled downstream. It adapted and changed as it went along, but it never faltered. It gained more power the further it went too. There were rapids and waterfalls downstream that could crush you in a heartbeat. The downstream river could sweep you away and batter you against the rocks and throw you on the shore just as dead as a doornail if it wanted to, just like the eastern exit.

There was uncertainty at the end of the eastern exit ... achievement or disappointment, wealth or poverty, fulfillment or despair. The eastern exit had waterfalls and rapids for sure, but there were places of unknown beauty too. I'd never know them unless I took the chance and traveled the course, but like the water of the river, I'd never be able to travel back upstream once I'd made my choice.

"It's time," I said again, as The Big Dodge rumbled beneath me. "I can't put it off any longer."

There were two papers pinned between the back of my thigh and the seat of the car. One was postmarked from New York and the other was the front page of our local newspaper. A big picture of Nick looked up from below the headline and it made me reach to the side of my neck. The scar there was just starting to mature after a year, and as it slowly remodeled itself it
contracted and pulled every time I turned my head. It would probably never loosen up completely. It would always be there to remind me, just like the new porcelain crown on my front tooth. Looking at his picture made me leave my foot firmly planted on the brake pedal. It took me back in time and suddenly I could smell the scent of ripe wheat and feel the heat of the summer's sun a year ago. I could close my eyes and see him too.

Each part of the river depends on what happened upstream. That’s why it was important to take some time at the crossroads before deciding if my downstream course lay to the east or the west. I needed a little time to think about Nick and remember … remember what happened upstream.

2
Harvest

I looked down into the twenty-two foot header as I drove the combine along the eastern edge of the three hundred-acre parcel of land. The oscillating blades sliced the yellow stalks like barber shears, and then the auger slowly funneled the wheat onto the conveyor belt right below my feet. The scent of ripe grain mixed with warm dry dust and drifted up to my nose as the big diesel droned steadily behind me. The motor powered an endless series of wheels, gears, and pulleys that transmitted a steady vibration through the machine and into the seat of the cab. I could feel it through my blue jeans. We were one … man and machine in tune with each other. When the mood of the combine changed, I could feel it right through the cheeks of my ass.

I forced myself to pay attention. I was a "machine man," and I was responsible for driving the big green combine up, down, and across the hills of slippery straw. It was a job that needed to be taken seriously, because an inattentive machine man could easily end up dead … squashed flat beneath the hard steel of the eight-ton machine and the warm dirt at the bottom of a gully. In spite of the danger though, I couldn't get my mind off of Annette. I was starting to realize that forgetting her was a lot easier said than done.

I'd remembered her from high school. I'd watched her at the football games from my seat in the band while she did her routines along the sidelines. I'd watched her skirt float up and down with each kick and wondered at the treasures that were hidden beneath it. I didn't know she'd be working the same harvest crew as me, and now, after looking at her every day for nearly three weeks, I was about to go crazy.

She helped cook for the crew, and took care of the foreman's kids during harvest. She knew we were watching her when she walked back and forth from the kitchen to the dinner table.
She knew it and she liked it, because she never passed up a chance to show us a little something. I'd memorized every part her. I'd noticed how the goose bumps stood up beneath the sweat on her skin. I knew the smell of her hair, and I knew all the places that her skin turned from tan to white as it disappeared into her halter-top. I'd give anything for a night with Annette. I could feel the crotch of my jeans get warm just thinking about her.

I pulled back on the header and pushed the hydrostat forward. The levelers groaned as the combine adjusted and the wheat disappeared into the auger. I could feel the slow vibration of the threshing cylinder as it compressed and sheared the seeds from the straw beneath me and the fans blew the chaff out the back end. The combine was like a big green goose, constantly eating wheat in front and shitting straw out the back.

She'd always been nice to me, I thought. Maybe she'd be interested? But I knew it wouldn't happen. She was interested in Nick ... they were all interested in Nick. It had been that way ever since I could remember. I couldn't begrudge him his good fortune, but I sure as hell could be jealous of him. I couldn't help but be jealous of Nick.

I wondered if he'd been with her in the evening behind the grain elevator while I read my books in the bunkhouse. Maybe they'd done it on the grass in the yard right outside my window while I slept. The thought of it made me ache. Wherever they'd been, and whatever they'd done, I was sure Nick didn't appreciate it the way I would have. I tried to concentrate on the machine, but the thought of a night on the cool evening lawn with Annette made me feel dizzy. I shook my head and pulled back on the hydrostat.

I turned the corner at the southeast part of the cut and saw the C-600 loading truck parked exactly where I'd left it. Nick had crawled into it and hadn't even bothered to move it up to the line of uncut wheat before he went to sleep. As soon as I got close enough I let him have it. I pushed on the horn and watched with satisfaction as he jumped up from behind the steering wheel. I saw him fumble with the keys as I pulled up behind him and laid on the horn again. I stuck my head out of the cab of the combine.

"Hey Nick! Wake up and pull over to the line!"

I saw his face appear through the passenger's window.

"Fuck you Brooks!" he said.

It was our standard response to any question, comment, or remark made during the harvest season as long as the foreman's wife and kids weren't around. I started to shout in return, but stopped when I heard the roar of the engine and saw the truck pull forward to the
wheat line. He stopped and got out. I let the combine idle as I lowered the loading conveyor and watched the grains of wheat empty into the bed of the truck. I opened the door and hopped out.

"What were you doing in there?" I asked above the noise of the engine. "Dreaming about Annette?"

He rocked his head back and laughed. "Fuck you Brooks!" he said again.

I made a fist with my left hand and slid the index finger of my right hand in and out through the center of it.

"How was she anyway?" I asked.

"I've told you before," he said, "The guys who talk the least get the most.... That's why you'll never know."

"Fuck you Nick."

"Not today Brooks."

He nearly broke my shoulder as he punched me in the arm.

"Just climb into the truck and dream about the music," he said. "That's what you always dream about isn't it? It's always the music...." He held his hands out in front of himself and wiggled his fingertip's up and down as if playing the piano.

He knew about it. I hadn't told him, but he knew. He laughed again, and I watched the sun sparkle off his teeth. That Goddamned Nick! He even looked good wearing a tattered T-shirt and worn out blue jeans in the middle of a dirty wheat field. I couldn't blame Annette. I really couldn't.

He climbed up the ladder of the combine and swung easily into the cab. He pointed to the line of uncut wheat that I'd just left behind and said.

"Don't let me find you asleep on the job when I get back. Make sure you pull the truck up to the line."

"Fuck you Nick!"

He flipped me the bird with his left hand, and I showed him the middle finger of my right. We saluted each other as he disappeared over the hill to the west.

I pulled the truck over to the line and leaned my left shoulder against the back of the driver's side door. I wondered how he knew I'd been dreaming about the music. I didn't remember telling him, but somehow he knew. He always seemed to know. Ever since we were little kids it had been like that. Sometimes I wondered if we felt the same things at the same time, like we were twins of different mothers.

I pointed my hips toward the center of the seat and straddled the gearshift lever with my legs. The only good thing about driving the truck was the chance to sleep in the morning. Once it
started to heat up in the afternoon it would get too hot to sleep. The wheat chaff would stick to my skin and I'd itch until my evening shower, but for awhile at least, I'd be able to sleep. So I laid my head back against the driver’s side door and fell asleep right away. I dreamed about the same thing I always did. There were trumpets and trombones and saxophones and it reminded me of Count Basie or Stan Kenton. It made me wonder where that sound had been for my generation. It made me wonder what we had been missing. Those horns made me feel whole, and I wanted to be a part of it until the smoke spoiled everything. It boiled up through the floorboards of the truck, and then my cough reflex jolted me from my sleep like an electric shock.

The cab of the truck felt like a sauna, and a thick haze made it impossible to even see out of the window. I struggled between sleep and consciousness as I tried to orient myself, but my instincts wouldn’t wait for my brain to catch up, so I shoved open the door and leaped from the cab to the wheat stubble below. I looked up from my hands and knees and tried to find a landmark in the haze but couldn’t see a thing. I stood up and took a few steps before stumbling and falling back to the ground. My lungs burned and I couldn't see the truck anymore. The smoke surrounded me. I coughed uncontrollably and felt the heat press in from the left. It was all happening too fast. I crawled in the dirt and tried to avoid the smoke, as I searched for breath and waited for my mind to clear.

The smell of the smoke mixed in with the dust finally made me realize that I was caught in the middle of a Goddamn wheat fire, and for most people that only happened once. I’d heard the stories, and now that sick-sweaty feel of panic started working it’s way up the back of my spine. Sometimes men and machine were melted beyond recognition in the heat. Sometimes guys just like me got trapped inside their equipment and disintegrated when the flames reached the fuel tanks. It didn't matter what the mechanism was; it only meant death if you couldn't find your way out.

For an instant I thought about the music again. I wondered if I’d ever have the chance to know it. I coughed and felt the heat sear my lungs and then I forgot about the music. I hugged the dirt and just tried to breathe. I wondered where Nick was. I wondered if I'd ever see my nineteenth birthday.

3
Nick Strode

I don't remember much after that. I remember the taste of dirt and the smell of smoke. I remember the heat burning my throat and a hollow hot feeling that went all the way down through
my lungs. I remember everything starting to get dark, and then a force pulling me up so hard that my head felt as if it would snap off.

My first instinct was to run so I moved my legs, but there was nothing beneath my feet. I felt myself being propelled along as if running through the air with a jet engine strapped to my back. I thought I might be dying. I heard grunting and panting through the sounds of the fire that didn't belong to me. The flames sounded close ... real close.

I came down without nearly the force I'd come up with. I recognized the inside of the pickup truck and then heard the click of a seat belt. I was being strapped in. How strange it seemed. Why would anybody worry about a seat belt in the middle of a fire? I took a big breath, but when I drew in the air my lungs seized in a fit of coughing. I hacked up a big blob of coal-black sputum that clung to the palm of my hand. I looked at it with surprise as the engine screamed and we took off. We raced past the C-600 and I saw the paint on the side of it peeling off in the heat.

"We've got to go north! There's no way out through the fire to the south. Shit! What a mess! We're running like a couple of trapped rats!"

A driver! Of course! Somebody was driving the truck. I'd been so pre-occupied with taking my next breath that the fact I wasn't alone surprised me at first. The fog in my brain was starting to clear as I turned my head toward the voice and looked through the haze of smoke and dirt at the form behind the steering wheel. Slowly, I recognized the features of Nick. His shirt was torn and his body and face were covered with soot. His short dark hair was soaked in sweat and it stuck out from his head at every conceivable angle. I watched the thick slabs of muscle erupt in his shoulder as he rammed the gearshift into third. I saw his eyes narrow, and a little smile cross his lips. I'd seen that smile before. I'd seen it lots of times, and it comforted me now. I tried to speak, but nothing came from my throat, just a dry hiss of a sound. My head fell back to the rear window and then jerked forward suddenly as I vomited on the dashboard.

"Brooks! Are you all right!"

I felt his hand grab me like a vice and pull me back up into the seat. I coughed up another thick black glob of sputum that dribbled off my lower lip onto the front of my shirt. I could hear myself wheeze. I felt the pickup go airborne as we went over a rut. My head hit the top of the cab, but I managed to stay upright when we landed. I turned my head toward Nick and tried to speak again, but there was only a gurgling sound as the saliva rattled around in the back of my throat.

The wind from the south pushed the smoke along with us. The small pickup advanced in a cloud. We could see no more than a few feet in front of us. I looked for landmarks as I listened
to the uncut wheat slap against the bottom of the truck. I couldn't see the sun or the sky. We were just running ... instinctively away from the flames toward the steep gully that was to the north. We had no sense of direction. We could run right into the gully and it would kill us just at dead as the fire. At least it would be faster than the fire, maybe less painful too. It would be just a short ride through the air to the bottom and then wham!! It would be all over for Nick and me. Suddenly I saw the wheat in front of us disappear and there was fresh-plowed earth in its place. Nick hit the brakes.

"They did it!" he shouted. He looked at me with a smile on his face. "They cut a fire lane!"

The strip was only forty feet wide, but unmistakable even in the thick smoke. Nick jerked the wheel to the right as he hit the gas again and we entered the fire lane. The wall of flames advanced to the south and east, the gully lay to the north and west.

"Our only chance is to run a race with the fire," he said. "We either win the race or kiss our ass goodbye."

He floored the pickup again, and jerked it into second. I saw that same little smile cross his face ... the one I'd watched so many times before. I tried to speak, but my larynx only made a buzzing sound. I kept my eyes on Nick. It made me feel better when I saw that look on his face. He was in the zone, and you could always count on Nick when he was in the zone.

I felt my head bouncing off the back of the seat, and each time I tried to breathe it hurt the inside of my lungs. I reached up to my neck with my right hand and winced as I touched burned flesh. The fire had left its mark but I was alive. I was alive because of Nick. We were both in big trouble, but he would take care of it. He always did. Of all the guys in the world to have around when there was trouble, he was the best ... the best there ever was.

I watched his eyes move back and forth from the firewall to the plowed dirt in front of us. He looked to his right and gauged the distance as if calculating the speed of the truck and the fire at the same time. The more important the game, the better he liked it. He was almost unbeatable in fact, when it mattered the most.

He kept the gas pedal floored and jerked the gearshift into fourth. I could see the heads of wheat explode into flames on our right side. I tried to draw in a breath and remind myself that everything would be all right.

The small pickup was perfectly suited to run the race. It was light and agile, with plenty of power and four-wheel drive. The machine flew along the tops of the furrows, sliding in and out of the small ditches as we raced to the eastside of the property. We watched the wall of fire approach on our right. Nick moved to the left side of the plowed lane. He kept his right foot on the
floor. The fire closed on our right side and the windshield suddenly turned black. We could still feel the earth beneath our wheels. It was the only connection we had to the world we knew. I felt the heat fill the cab, and the smoke in my lungs made me cough up more black goobers that I spit on the floor. I looked up and the smoke was gone, disappearing just as fast as it had come and then being replaced by a clear blue sky and a brilliant sun. We both squinted. Nick yelled and I joined him as best I could with a grunt. The foreman and the rest of the crew were on the eastside of the property watching the fire lane and we could see them hooting and hollering and waving their caps as they slapped each other on the back. Nick slowed the truck and the foreman ran up. The fire continued its rampage behind us as if nothing had happened.

"Shit Nick! I told you not to go in there! I'm lucky the two of you are still alive!"

He had blood in the corner of his mouth and his jaw was swollen. He looked past Nick at me.

"I thought you were a goner son, but Nick would have none of it. He went in after you, and I couldn't stop him." He touched the side of his jaw gently before continuing. "He punched me out and stole my truck and went right into the middle of that God-damned fire … the crazy son-of-a-bitch. He drove right into the middle of the fire for you, and I though he was a goner too."

I tried to speak. The words were unrecognizable. The foreman looked back at Nick.

"Is he all right?"

"I think so," Nick said. "He's burned on the neck and he's coughing a lot, but he's still breathing."

"Get him into the hospital," the foreman said. "Get him in there as fast as you can." He stepped away from the truck.

We pulled away from the rest of the crew and I could hear the foreman shouting to the other men.

"They're both all right. Thank God for that," he said. "Nick pulled him right out of the middle of that Goddamn fire."

His voice and the sounds of the fire disappeared as we pulled onto the highway and accelerated. Nick rolled down the window and let the rushing air clean out the cab of the pick-up. I could see the big river on the horizon, right over the top of his left shoulder. He looked at me and smiled.

"I told you not to let me catch you sleeping," he said, as he rubbed the top of my head with his hand. "See what happens when you don't listen to me?"

I struggled to speak and my voice finally formed a few words.
“Fuck you ... Nick ...” I croaked.

It was the only thing I could think to say.

4

The Big Dodge

I had everything I owned in the back of my '58 Dodge. There was plenty of room left over too, because the Dodge was a land yacht. It was a silver behemoth, with big chunks of chrome on the front bumper that made it look like a battering ram from the Middle Ages. The car flowed back from the front end in a mass of gently curved glass and steel. Two mammoth doors provided entry onto the couch-like seats that were covered with translucent plastic seat covers. They burned your legs in the summer and frosted your ass in the winter, but they kept the vinyl fabric pristine beneath them. I looked in the rear-view mirror at the fins that sloped up and away into the horizon. Somewhere back there The Big Dodge harbored a trunk that was big enough to smuggle in four kids on buck-night at the drive in.

I'd bought the car with my harvest money. The windshield wipers didn't always work, and there was an oil leak that I needed to chase down. I'd just about had a heart attack the first time the radio turned on all by itself. There was a short under the dash, and every bump in the road had the potential to jostle the wire just enough to turn it on or off at a whim. In spite of her quirks and idiosyncrasies though, she was a damned good car. She wasn't pretty, but I was learning to love her.

I turned the key, and the well used V-8 slowly rolled over like a fat fish that wasn't serious about taking the bait. She fired and a cloud of smoke appeared briefly in the rear view mirror before it drifted away and the engine settled into an uneven idle at nine hundred RPM. I saw my father come out the front door of the house while I waited for the engine to warm up. He looked like a man on a mission.

He wore light brown shorts and a short-sleeved plaid shirt. He walked a little stooped over and I was surprised at how small he looked. I guess I hadn't taken a real good look at him in awhile. His silver hair was trimmed in the usual crew cut and there was a small bald spot the size of a fifty-cent piece on the back of his head.

I wondered if this was the time that all fathers and sons waited for. I wondered if this was the moment when he'd give me that key piece of advice I needed to unlock the secret to
success. I'd better pay attention, I thought. He's probably rehearsed this speech for weeks. I wonder what he'll say? I wonder what his words of wisdom will be? He smiled, and extended his right hand through the window so I took it.

"Son, your mother and I are proud of you. You know that don't you?"
"Yes dad. I know."
"We're confident you'll make the right decisions. Life is all about making good decisions."
"I know dad, you've told me that a hundred times."
"You can do anything you want, all you have to do is work. There are no limitations for you."
"You've told me that before too."
"Good luck!" He said, and he stepped away from the car.

I waited for a moment before reaching toward the transmission buttons that were clustered in the left upper corner of the dash. I expected him to say something else. I rested my index finger on the button so he'd have enough time, but he didn't move or speak so I pushed it in. The Big Dodge shuddered as the car snapped into reverse. He spoke just as I started to back out of the driveway.

"And son!" he said.

This is it, I thought. All the other stuff was just a warm up. This is the advice I've been waiting for. I stopped the car.

"Yes dad."
"Never pass up a free meal ... and always be nice to the cook."

He gave me a nod, and that was it. I felt a little empty. I took my foot off the brake and rolled out into the street. Somehow it just didn't turn out to be what I'd expected.

I drove The Big Dodge down Main Street and turned right just past the drug store. I slowed down and eased The Big Dodge over the railroad tracks before driving south on Elm. I rounded a curve in the road and saw Nick in the front yard with his dad.

He held a small equipment bag in his right hand. Neither of them noticed me as I parked the car along the curb in front of their house. They stood nose to nose with Nick's dad doing most of the talking. They were about the same height now, but the difference in years showed in the thickness of Nick's old man. He had a round belly and a butt that looked twice as big as Nick's. He was a big man, two thirty or forty at least, and even though he was fat, you could still see the power in him. His shoulders looked just like his son's. They sloped away from his thick neck like the base of a mountain, and the forearms that stuck out from his rolled-up shirt sleeves
looked like a couple of jackhammers. He had a big fat finger that he was poking into the center of Nick's chest as he talked. Nick bounced back a little bit each time the finger landed.

The old man always scared the shit out of me. He seemed pissed off about something all the time. He was a security guard who worked at night, and nobody saw him much during the day. That was fine with me, I just wanted to stay out of his way. Even Nick had been afraid of him when we were little, but as we got older and Nick got bigger I'd noticed him starting to stand up to his old man a little bit. Nick didn't want to mess with him, nobody did, but I had the impression that the old man was starting to realize he couldn't bully Nick anymore, at least not the way he used to. He still had the advantage that years of intimidation could bring, but Nick was now just as big as he was, and without the fat.

I let The Big Dodge idle. Nick looked in my direction, but the old man poked him in the chest again. He looked back toward his dad who said something else. I couldn't make it out through the rumbling and clattering of the engine. Finally Nick turned away and walked toward the car. I could tell his old man didn't like it, and I heard his voice rise above the noise of the valve lifters.

"Keep your head on straight!" he shouted after his son.

Nick threw his bag in the back of the car and climbed into the front seat.

"Let's go," he said.

"What's that all about?" I asked.

"Nothing ... let's just go."

I drove away from his house and watched in the rear view mirror as his dad walked across the front lawn with his hands on his hips looking at the ass end of my car. I turned on First Avenue and entered the ramp to highway twelve. The big V-8 pulled the heavy car up to sixty without a sweat. I looked toward Nick but he kept his head down and his mouth shut. I knew there was no point in pushing it. He'd talk when he was ready.

Through the windshield I could see the fields of wheat stubble left over from the harvest. They looked like giant unshaved whiskers now. There was a tractor pulling a plow in the middle of the field, and the stubble turned to black earth behind it. I touched the burn on my neck with my left hand while I waited for Nick to start talking. It took three minutes that felt like twenty.

"He's pissed because I came home for the week-end," he said. "He says I should have stayed at school and lifted weights."

"You don't need to lift weights," I said.
"He says I'm too small. He says one-ninety just isn't big enough anymore for division 1-A. He says I've got to get up to two-twenty at least. He says that if I don't get bigger I'll lose my scholarship. I promised him I'd lift just as soon as I got to school. You'll have to get settled into the house on your own. There'll be plenty of guys there to help you out."

The tractor kept crawling along and the stubble kept disappearing behind it. A cloud of dust moved along behind the machinery.

"How does he know?" I asked.

"Know what?"

"How does he know about all that stuff? How big you should be ... and lifting the weights."

"He knows," Nick said. His voice seemed to have an edge to it. "He knows all about that stuff. He was a great player. He could have been All-State; maybe even All-American except he hurt his knee during his junior year in high school and the coach just never gave him a chance after that. I think that's why he gets so mad sometimes. He could have been an all-pro, but now all he does is work at a job he hates."

I'd heard the story a hundred times. It had been drilled into Nick's head ever since he was old enough to walk. The old man had pushed him hard from the beginning, and taken most of the credit, but I often wondered if he was more of a liability than an asset when it came to Nick.

I looked at the tractor again. Our little town had a cycle based on what was happening in the fields. Plowing meant the start of school. Planting followed the plowing, and then the dormancy of winter preceded the green growth of spring. Finally the fields turned golden and when summer was at its hottest the harvest started. I touched the side of my neck again. I ran my fingers over the uneven surface. Most of the burns had been first and second degree, but there was a spot on my neck that had been third degree and the doctors let it heal without a skin graft. Now a thick scar clung there like a piece of glued-on leather. It felt smooth and lumpy at the same time, and it still tingled when I touched it.

"You didn't have to come back," I said. "You could have stayed at school."

He shrugged his shoulders. "I just didn't feel like lifting the weights. I wanted to get you settled in the house. My old man doesn't understand any of that stuff. All he thinks about is my scholarship and the football team."

"At least he gave you some advice. At least he cares enough to do that. That's more than I got."

"What are you talking about?"
"I was ready for some advice from my dad today, but all he told me was to never pass up a free meal."

"Is that all he said?"

"Well ... that and to always be nice to the cook."

"You're kidding," Nick said with a smile. "That's a good one."

"I'm not kidding. That's all he said."

He leaned back in his seat. "It would be wise to be nice to the cook, that's for sure. You wouldn't want to fuck with Margaret."

"Who's Margaret?"

"She's the cook. Nobody fucks with Margaret. You'll see."

"I just kept thinking I was missing something?" I continued. "I kept waiting for him to say something else ... to tell me something important. But nothing happened. I just expected something more, that's all."

I watched the road approach the bank of the river on our right. It followed the water for awhile before it crossed the interstate to the north. Nick looked at the river too. The water level was low this time of year, and I watched with him as the water swirled around the small islands and sandbars that three months ago were covered with spring runoff.

"He didn't need to tell you anything else," he said finally.

"What do you mean?"

"The river always changes," he said. "It adapts to the new season, but it's always dependent on what happened upstream during another time."

"What are you talking about?"

"I know what your father was doing," he said, as we both watched the swirling currents of the river. "He knows the real work has already been done upstream. He's already given you everything you need. He can't do anything more. He can't change you in a few minutes just before you leave for college. It takes a lot of time. Your dad knows that. His work is done. He knows your ready, and so do I."

Nick always had a way of doing that ... seeing things that I couldn’t and then making me realize it with some kind of parable. I knew he was right, at least the part about my dad doing what he did. The part about me being ready I felt less sure about. I looked at the speedometer. It held steady at sixty. I didn't hear any funny noises from the engine.

"Why are you going to the university anyway?" he asked me matter-of-factly. He still looked at the river.
The question surprised me. I turned the knob on the radio but nothing happened. "It's a good school," I said, knowing it wouldn't be enough.

"Come on! You could have gone anywhere. Stanford begged you to come after they saw your SAT's, and all those Ivy League schools wanted you too. Why didn't you go to one of those schools? They're better than the university. Are you sure you're not better off going someplace else?"

"I like the university," I said. "I don't want to go to any of those other schools."

He didn't say anything more. He just looked out the window while I wondered if he was right. But in the end I knew I couldn't go anywhere else. Nick went to the university, and that's where I'd go. Last summer wasn't the first time he'd saved my ass. He'd always been there every time I'd needed him. Every time I'd gotten into trouble, he'd been there to take care of it. Every time I'd felt alone or afraid I'd looked over my shoulder and found him. I'd been with him from the first day I could remember. Harvard could go fuck itself. I'd go to the university ... and be with Nick.

"How do you do it Brooks?"

"Do what?"

"How do you score so high on those tests? How do you know about physics and math and all the rest of that stuff?"

"It's no big deal."

He looked away from the river and shook his head. "That's bullshit. It's a big deal all right. It's a real big deal. I wish I could do it. Sometimes I get so ... mixed up during the tests. Sometimes it's just so hard. I wish I was more like you."

It surprised me. I never thought anybody wanted to be like me, especially Nick. He was the man. He'd always been the man. He had everything worth having.

"And what about the music?" he asked. "How to you do those things with the music?"

"What things?"

"You know what I mean. How do you hear a song and then play it on the piano without even practicing it? How do you make up those songs?"

"I don't know how I do it. It just comes out."

He looked at me and shook his head again. I'd played music for most of my life, but in the last few years the notes had started to form in my head and flow out through my fingers without even thinking about it. Words too. Sometimes the words came out with the music, and blended with the notes.
“There’s more to it than that,” he said. “A lot more. Are you going to be able to play music while you’re at the university? What about your music?”

“I’ve got a keyboard.... I can play that.”

I wondered if it would be enough. My piano playing had become automatic. I didn’t have to think about it anymore. I could do it with my trumpet too, but I could only play one note at a time on the horn. The things I saw in my mind were becoming much more complicated than that. There were cords, scales, and progressions that were all starting to blend together.

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad you’re going to the university,” he said. “But I hope you’ve made the right choice. I hope you don’t end up wishing you’d gone someplace else.”

“I won’t regret it,” I told him. But I wasn’t sure I believed it. I didn’t know if he believed it either.

We turned west on the interstate and as we started to move closer to the campus I began to get a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. I guess I wasn’t so worried about school or the music. That didn’t worry me a bit. It was all the other stuff that bothered me. It was like starting all over.

How would I figure out where my classes were? How would I keep track of all the different teachers and assignments? What would the other kids be like, and what about all the girls? Jesus! The girls! Thinking about seven thousand girls on one campus made my head swim. What would any of them find interesting about a skinny, plain-looking guy like me whose biggest claim to fame was running cross-country on the junior varsity? Why would any of them care?

I felt the same old feelings stirring around that I always did whenever I thought about girls. I’d started thinking about sex whenever I saw, talked to, or even mentioned girls. I’d been trying to separate the two, but I just couldn’t seem to do it. It seemed like sex/girls was occupying a bigger and bigger part of my mind every single day.

It wasn’t like I had any experience or anything. I’d only been out with a few girls in my life and only once did anything happen. It was after a dance my senior year and I’d managed to coax a girl I knew from the band into going with me for a drive. We went out into the country and somehow ended up in the back seat of my dad’s car. She was wearing a white blouse that buttoned down the front and as we kissed I’d felt the softness of her skin between the bottom of her shirt and the tops of her jeans. My heart raced as I inched my hand up toward her breast and just as my fingertips reached the fabric of her bra she came down with her right arm hard, trapping my wrist under her elbow and making me yell out in pain. I pulled my hand out from the warm place beneath her shirt and she pushed me away. I was left sitting there in the back seat
of my dad's car panting like a dog with my dick as hard as a rock. My pecker was inching its way up past the waistband of my briefs and making me squirm. I felt the elastic begin to strangle my manhood while she just smiled at me and pulled her blouse down. My heart sank right down to my toes. It took me a week to get over it.

Nick told me later that it was a standard defensive maneuver. He told me that I shouldn't get discouraged, that I was to move the other hand around the back and try to sneak it up the side when that happened, but I didn't know that at the time and I'd never gotten another chance. I didn't know what to say to her for a week after that, and before I knew it she was dating the second chair saxophone player and I was out of the picture.

We hit a bump in the road and the radio turned on. Fleetwood Mac played "Go Your Own Way," while I thought about the university and the fraternity and the girls. Maybe things would work out better there than they had in high school. There were so many questions. There were so many new experiences and so many unknowns ... and so many girls. Thinking about the university made my stomach cramp. Thinking about the girls just gave me another hard on.

"Why do they call it rush?" I asked. I still didn't understand what Nick was getting me into. The radio suddenly went dead halfway through the song and he slapped the dash but nothing happened.

"I don't know," he said, as he twisted the tuning knob.

"What's it like? What am I supposed to do?"

"You just wander around campus for a couple of days and look at all the houses. If you find one you like and they ask you to pledge, then you join it." He tried the volume knob without any better luck.

"Can't I just join your house?"

"Only on the third day. We can't ask anybody to pledge until the third day. Besides ... everybody has to agree before we pledge a guy. If he gets dinged we can't pledge him."

"What's dinged?"

"That's what we call it when some of the members don't want you in the house. You get dinged."

I felt my heart sink. "You mean I might not get in?"

Nick slapped the dash again. "What's the deal with this radio? It turns off and on all by itself."

"I don't give a shit about the radio."

"What?"
"Forget the radio Nick. Are you saying I might not be able to pledge your house?"
"Well ... I guess so, but it takes two guys to ding."
"What if I don't get in? Then what will I do?"
"Don't worry about it. I'll take care of you."
This was an angle I hadn't counted on. I could end up following Nick to the university and then not even be able to pledge his fraternity. I felt myself becoming less enthusiastic about the whole prospect of rush.
"When will I know if you'll pledge me."
"The houses that want you will ask you on the third day of rush, and you have another day to make up your mind."
"What if nobody asks me?" I asked again.
"Don't worry about it. Everything will work out."
"That's easy for you to say. Everybody knew about you when you went to college. Nobody knows me. I don't think anybody's going to be too impressed with the captain of the debate team."
"Nobody's going to know that you're the captain of the debate team."
"See what I mean?" I said. "Nobody's going to know anything about me. Why will they want to pledge me?"
"Don't worry. I'll be looking out for you."
We drove through the main entrance to the university and followed the road up the hill toward the north end of the campus. It seemed bigger than I remembered it. The buildings were taller than anything at home was, and the biggest building by far was the football stadium. It occupied the entire eastside of the campus, and it was connected to all of the other athletic buildings by tunnels and covered skywalks. I drove straight toward it and dropped Nick off at the training complex.
"I'll see you at the house," he said. "Just let one of the guys know who you are and they'll show you around. You know how to get there right?"
I nodded my head.
"Don't worry," he said. "Everything will work out."
"I hope so Nick ... I hope you're right."
I watched him walk down the sidewalk and into the building with his gym bag. He moved easily past the glass windows and sauntered down the hallway. It was easy for Nick to say everything would work out. It had always been easy for him. The rest of us lived by a different set
of rules than he did. His world was almost in a parallel universe when compared to mine. He was subject to different physical laws and different rules and expectations. I had a lot of fear and doubt in this place, but I had him on my side. That was the one sure thing that I had. It was a trump card all right. It was a big trump card, and I was glad to have it.

5
Sigma Tau

I drove down the main boulevard and turned right onto Greek Row just like Nick told me to. The street ran east to west through a bunch of old houses that were on a narrow lane shaded by trees growing up from the parking strips. They were big trees. They were so big that some of the branches arched over the street to touch those on the opposite side, creating a tunnel of foliage. It looked just like I always thought a college campus should.

It was easy to tell the sororities from the fraternities. The paint was fresher and the lawns looked greener at the girl's houses. The fraternities, on the other hand, looked like they were suffering from the effects of male habitation. There were broken down lawn chairs on the front porches and abandoned garden tools scattered across the yard. At some of the places there were work parties of shirtless fraternity guys pulling weeds and washing windows. One house had laundry hanging from the front door. It was easy to see that some of the fraternities hadn't seen much attention since June.

I turned into the alley behind the Sigma Tau house and looked for an opening in the crowded parking lot. I found a spot right next to a Rambler, the likes of which I'd never seen before. It had big fat tires that looked as though they'd been stuffed inside the fender wells with a crow bar. I got out of The Big Dodge and peered through the windows of the alien Rambler. It had tan tuck-and-roll interior, and a Hurst shifter with a chromed handle. A couple of foam rubber dice dangled from the rear view mirror.

"It's a bitchin' rig isn't it?"

I turned toward the sound of the voice and saw a skinny kid who was just a little bit taller than me leaning up against the back porch of the Sigma Tau house. He wore bell-bottomed jeans with brown Hush Puppies and white socks. His Rugby shirt was unbuttoned at the collar, and his long thick hair extended down almost to his shoulders. A thin wisp of a blonde mustache
grew on his upper lip; I barely noticed it from where I stood. It looked like it wasn’t worth the effort. He walked toward me and stuck out his right hand.

"I'm Mitchell," he said, and we shook hands. "That's my rig you're lookin' at."

"I like the tuck and roll," I said, as I looked back through the driver’s side window. "It must be fast."

He smiled and hooked his thumbs into the belt loops of his jeans. "Everybody like's tuck and roll." He winked and leaned against the front fender. "Especially the chicks. Chicks really love tuck and roll."

I nodded my head as I examined the interior again. "I'll bet it's fast," I said again. "What have you done to the motor?"

Mitchell pushed off from the front fender and squatted down on his haunches by the wheel. "You know, the thing that really sets this rig apart from the rest of the stuff on the road, is the wheels," he said. "Look at those things! I've got Cragar mags with 250/60 x 14 inch Firestone's on the back. The front's are 205/75's." He admired the wheels for a few more seconds before he looked up. "They rub sometimes when I go around the corners too fast, but they look great don't you think?"

"You probably need all that rubber," I said. "I'll bet this thing really goes."

He walked around the front of the car and touched the big black decal that traveled down the length of the car. "I put the racing stripe on myself," he said. "It took me all day to get it on straight, but it was worth it. Chicks really go for cars with a racing stripe."

I nodded my head in agreement even though I'd never bothered to ask a girl what her feelings were about racing stripes.

"Yeah ... I guess your right," I said. "Let's have a look under the hood."

"Yeah ... sure ... I'll show it to you sometime. Are you going through rush?"

"I guess so."

"Me too. I wish I didn't have to. I wish I could just pledge right now."

"I know what you mean," I said. "I hope I can find someplace that'll ask me to pledge."

"Maybe we can go through rush together ... you know ... look out for each other. What's your name anyway?" he asked.

"Brooks ... Brooks Holman."

"I'll help you with your stuff," he said, as he reached into The Big Dodge and pulled out my bag. "I came in last night. All the freshmen are bunking together on the second floor."
I grabbed my sleeping bag and followed Mitchell toward the house. "What's your first name Mitchell?"

"Just call me Mitchell," he said. "Nobody ever calls me by my first name."

I walked through the back door of the house, and ran right into the biggest man I'd ever seen. I bounced off of him like a ping pong ball off a paddle. I staggered backwards, almost dropping my sleeping bag before recovering my balance and looking back at the giant.

He was six foot five at least, with a torso shaped like a wedge. He had long thick arms that hung from broad shoulders, and a flared upper back that tapered to a small waist. His thighs bulged out from beneath his blue jeans, stretching the denim tight. He didn't seem the least bit fat. He looked like a great big raw-boned Cowboy. The biggest Goddamned Marlboro Man I'd ever seen. He wore a nametag on his shirt, and at the top it said, "I'm damn proud I'm a Sigma Tau!"

At the bottom was his name in clear printed letters ... it said John Pursell.

My mouth hung open as I looked up at Pursell. He had thin blond hair, with bald spots on each side of his forehead. His eyes were fixed in an intent squint; his nose was razor-straight and his lips thin. He stuck out a massive right hand and I took it and shook it slowly. It felt like a great big vise.

"Who'd you drag in from the alley Mitchell?"

Mitchell stammered as he spoke. Pursell seemed to have the same effect on him as he had on me. We were both nearly speechless.

"He says his name's Brooks Holman. He's here for rush."

Pursell looked at me and I felt my knees shake.

"So you're Brooks," Pursell said. "I've heard about you. I'm glad to meet you. Was your trip all right?"

"Yeah ... sure," I said. "I've heard about you too." I felt like a schoolboy. "You were all-American last year. I watched you play on TV." Pursell looked pleased with the recognition.

"Come with me Brooks," he said. "I'll show you around."

He turned down the hall and his form momentarily blotted out the light coming from the other end. He motioned with his left hand for me to follow, and I obeyed him. We walked into the foyer by the front door and he stopped.

"This is the old section of the house," he said. "It was built sixty five years ago and has three stories. It's one of the oldest buildings on campus."

Then he turned and pointed toward the dining room to the west. "Fifteen years ago there was a new section added to the house. It has three stories too, so when we talk about the house
we always refer to the section and the floor. The freshmen are staying in the lounge on the second floor of the new section. We eat meals on the first floor of the new section. The laundry is in the basement of the old section. You see how it works?"

"Sure John," I said. I almost winced when I called him by his first name. I wondered if I was supposed to call him Mr. Pursell or Mr. President, but he didn't bat an eye.

"You'll have plenty of time to look around the place later," he continued. "Nick wanted me to show you this before you saw anything else."

Mitchell and I followed Pursell past the front door and then we turned right past the stairway. We walked through a big living room with a brown shag carpet on the floor. Couches and chairs that looked way past their prime were along the walls beneath the windows. Small balls of dust and hair rested beneath them and threadbare patches in the carpet marked the spots where feet had rested over the years. A big square post made of dark stained wood supported the ceiling in the center of the room. Pursell walked past it to the corner.

"Nick thought this would be important to you."

I looked behind him at a five-foot baby grand. It was a 1926 Chickering. It had a spruce sounding board and solid ivory keys. I found middle C and pushed it with my index finger. The tone was beautiful.

"Do you like it?"

"What?"

"Do you like the piano?" Pursell asked. "Nick made a big deal out of it. He told everybody he wanted us to show it to you first thing."

Mitchell stared at me, his mouth hanging open.

"I like the piano," I said. "It's the nicest piano I've ever seen."

"Good!" Pursell said. "I'm glad you like it. You can play it all you want while you're here. Just promise me one thing."

I looked up from the piano. "What's that?"

"If you decide to pledge another house, come talk to me first. Will you promise me that?"

"Sure. Whatever you say. But why?"

"I want you to be sure you're making the right decision. That's all. It's important that you make the right decision. After all ... life is all about making good decisions," he said, and my heart skipped a beat.

He smiled at me before turning away and walking across the living room. I watched his smooth strides cover the distance in just a few quick steps, and then he disappeared through the
doorway. He moved like a much smaller man. He moved like a gymnast ... he was a great big gymnastic Marlboro Man.

"Who's Nick?"
It was Mitchell. He looked at me intently. I'd almost forgotten he was there.
"He's a friend of mine," I said. "He's a member of Sigma Tau. He's a year older than me and he pledged last year."

"He sounds like a pretty good guy to know."
I nodded my head in agreement as I fingered the keys on the piano.
"Yeah..." I said. "He's a pretty good guy to know."

6
Rush

I didn't know how much more I could take. I'd spent two days with Mitchell wandering through every house on campus talking to a bunch of guys I didn't even know, and would probably never see again. They led us through their houses and we asked them the same questions over and over again about study hours and how many guys they planned to pledge. We listened to them talk about how much rent they paid each month and whether or not they had a hell week. Most of them smiled when the subject of hell week came up. All of them said they didn't have one, but it was hard to know what to believe. The nights were just as confusing.

After dinner the competition for pledges intensified as kegs of beer and girls from the sororities rolled out onto Greek Row. Mitchell and I wandered around most of the night sampling brew from as many houses as we could and admiring the girls that looked even better the more beer we drank. I'd even woken up this morning with my first serious hangover. My head had been killing me all day, and I was glad to be walking toward the last house we needed to see before pledging started right after dinner. I didn't see the point in it, but Nick had insisted that I look at every house on campus.

Mitchell had been a trooper through the whole thing. We'd paired up together and plugged along listening to the same old shit over and over again. I was glad he was with me. There were a few people who recognized him on Greek Row. He'd played baseball in high school and from the sound of it he was pretty good, so he enjoyed a certain low-level celebrity status on campus. It seemed like that was all anybody cared about ... whether or not you played ball in high school
and whether or not you were on varsity or made all-conference. If you were all state it brought solemn admiration from everybody on Greek Row, and those on scholarship at the university were absolutely worshiped. Nick occupied the highest rung of the caste system on Greek Row, just like he had in high school. Life wasn't turning out to be too different for me either since nobody seemed to give a shit about SAT scores or cord progressions in D minor.

Every now and then somebody would see Mitchell and say hello, and he'd talk to them while I stood around and waited. It seemed to me that he had some options when it came to pledging a few of the houses. It would have been easy for him to ditch me, but he didn't. I was glad to have somebody to be with, but it made me realize how limited my choices were in this business of rush. I didn't know what I'd do if Nick's house didn't ask me to pledge.

The truth was that nobody on campus except the Sigma Tau's knew who the heck I was. I guess the process of Rush was a way for me to look around. It was a way for me to look at the inside of the houses I'd looked at from the outside during the past two days. It was a way to meet a bunch of guys who would forget my name a few seconds after I told it to them. It was a way to drink free beer at night and watch a bunch of girl's flirt with somebody else, but I didn't expect anybody to remember who I was. It wasn't turning out to be much different than high school in that respect.

We both trudged up the steps of the Pi Beta Delta house. It was the last stop on our tour of twenty-two houses. I looked at the sign above the door. I was getting pretty good at translating the Greek symbols into the name of the house. Each place had it's own abbreviation too. Some were known by just one word like Beta or Kappa. Others used just the letters, like SAE or DU. They all had their own reputation too. Some were filled with athletes. Some had a bunch of schoolmates from the same town. Some were just filled with guys who couldn't get in anywhere else. But the Pi Beta house was a party house, the biggest party house on campus.

From what I'd heard I didn't think I'd be interested, but we were in a rhythm and nothing could stop us from finishing the tour. So we marched ahead and I went through the mental checklist of questions we always asked. After going through every house on campus it was clear how the game worked. If they needed member's they'd send a bunch of guys to recruit us as soon as we came in the front door. They'd swarm around us like a pack of used car salesmen. Sometimes we'd have a tough time just finding our way out of the place. But if the house already had their class of freshmen wrapped up they did everything they could to discourage us from hanging around. Some of their techniques were pretty interesting.
One guy showed us a closet with a little desk and a chair stuffed inside. He told us it was a typical room we could expect if we pledged his house ... and he'd even managed to keep a straight face when he said it. Another guy hauled us down into the basement and made us look at the boiler room. We spent ten minutes in the basement watching him show us where the water went in and where it came out before we excused ourselves and got the hell out of there. I don't know who was happier, us or the guy who got stuck trying to get rid of us.

Needless to say we were both beat by the time we made it to the front of the Pi Beta house. We knocked on the front door and it almost fell off. The latch in the doorframe had rotted out, and one of the hinges was broken off. We grabbed the door and steadied it against the inside wall before walking in. A tall slender guy passing through the living room saw us. He tried to ignore us but we stood right in front of him and he had to stop.

"We're here to take a look at the house," Mitchell said.

The guy looked at us over the top of his shades. He had blonde hair that hung down just over the tops of his ears. He wore swim trunks and carried a beer in his right hand. A cigarette smoldered in his left.

"Isn't rush over yet?" He asked.

Mitchell and I looked at each other. We both shrugged.

"Rush is over at five o'clock. It's only four," I said.

He sighed and took a drag off his cigarette. "I'm on my way to the pool. I'll see if I can find somebody to show you around."

"You've got a pool?" Mitchell asked.

He pushed his shades up on his nose. "Yeah, we're the only house on campus with a pool," he said, as he scanned the living room. "Hey Charlie!" he barked. "Come over here and show these guys around the house."

I could see Charlie coming down the stairs on the other side of the living room. He stopped in his tracks and cringed. "Do I have to?" he asked. "Isn't rush over yet?"

The blonde guy in the shades looked back our way. "I guess not," he said. "At least not according to these two guys. They say it lasts till five." He took a drink of his beer. "Why don't you show them Damien's room Charlie? They might like Damien's room."

Charlie turned toward us and managed a smile. "Sure!" he said. "Damien's got the coolest room on campus. Why don't you guys follow me?"

We followed Charlie, and Mitchell started asking the usual questions. It was his turn. I'd done it at the house we'd just left.
"How many guys in the house?"
"Fifty six live here and another twenty or so off campus."
"How many in the pledge class?"
"Looks like about twenty this year." He took us up the stairs to the second floor. The banister was broken in three places.
"Do you guys have study hours for the freshmen?"
Charlie laughed. "Fuck study hours man! If you want that shit you'll have to go someplace else." He shook his head as he led us down the upstairs hall. "Study hours!" he said. "That's a good one!"

The carpet had been worn all the way through in the middle. Cigarette butts littered the floor and there was a hole in the wall the size of a football helmet.
"Do you have anybody in the house in pre-med?" I asked.
Charlie stopped in the hall. "You're not one of those guys are you?"
"One of what's?"
"A pre-med, you're not a fucking pre-med are you?"
"I was thinking about it."
"We don't have any of those guys. This is a party house man!" He shook his head again as he opened the door to Damien's room. "Pre-med!" he said. "I hate those guys. They always ruin the curve."

We walked past him into Damien's room. Charlie stayed at the doorway. The window's had been taped over with duct tape and the whole room was bathed in black light. The walls were covered with posters of athletes and girls in bikinis. Some of the posters glowed in the artificial light. The shelves were cluttered with mugs and beer cans and a bunch of other stuff I couldn't recognize in the darkness. Damien had constructed a bed between two desks that were built into the walls.

"Pretty bitchin room huh? Ol' Damien gets a lot of ass in here," Charlie said, as he flipped the ashes of his cigarette onto the floor. "A lot of ass ... ol' Damien."

Mitchell and I were speechless. Charlie took another drag on his cigarette.
"Damien's kind of a weird dude though. He like's snakes. He keeps one in his room. He doesn't even keep it in a cage or anything."

I felt my heart start to flutter.
"A snake? In here?" I said. "I hate snakes man ... I really hate snakes."
“Yeah!” Charlie responded. “That crazy fuck Damien. I don't think it's a rattler though. I think it's one of those fat black one's. A moccasin I think." He shook his head again. "Yeah ... that's it, a moccasin. That crazy fuck Damien."

"Moccasins are poisonous," I said.


I moved very slowly. I edged toward the door, but Charlie stood firmly in my way. He didn't move. He just slowly smoked his cigarette and smiled.

"We had a guy in the house who didn't know about the snake," Charlie continued. "He came in here and tried to steal some toothpaste from ol' Damien and BANG!" Charlie slapped his fist into the palm of his hand with a whack and I jumped three inches off the floor. "That ol' moccasin just got him right in the hand." Charlie said as he reached up and grabbed his cigarette between his thumb and forefinger. He blew smoke through his nose and it drifted up in front of his face. "Didn't kill him though," he said. "Just made him real sick ya know?" Charlie put the cigarette back into his mouth. "He quit the house after that. He went to live in the dorm second semester," Charlie said with satisfaction.

Everything in the room was starting to look like a snake. I thought about the pictures I'd seen of water moccasins. They were fat ugly black snakes with a mouth as white as cotton. The black light didn't help. Everything in the room looked black. The shoe on the floor looked like a big fat black snake. The crumpled up shirt on the bed looked like a big fat black snake coiled up and ready to strike. I looked at it, waiting to see a flash of white just before it sunk its fangs into my thigh. The snake could be anywhere. The Goddamned snake could be crawling right between my feet and I wouldn't even know it. It could drop off a bookshelf right onto my shoulder and open it's white mouth and bite me right in the neck.

"Let's look at something else," I said. I was moving toward the door but before I got there Mitchell reached forward and grabbed Charlie by the shirt. He pulled him into the room and slammed the door shut. The room got even darker.

"Let's stay here Brooks!" Mitchell said. "Let's find the fucking snake!"

I stumbled backward as Mitchell pulled Charlie in. I fell onto the bed, and rolled over as fast as I could. I felt something coil up around my neck and I brushed at it frantically with my left hand as I jumped up. I danced in the middle of the darkened room brushing my neck and looking at the bed in horror. I saw it there right on top of the covers. It was a black coiled up cord from a
pair of headphones that were connected to the stereo. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest.

"What are you doing?" I said to Mitchell. "Let's get out of here!"

"There's no snake," Mitchell said. He was in Charlie's face now. They were standing nose to nose in the corner of the room. He still clutched Charlie by the shirt. "This guy's a lyin' sack of shit," Mitchell said.

"Who you callin' a sack of shit?"
"You're a sack of shit."
"Fuck you," Charlie responded.
"Then where's the snake ass-hole?"
"There's a snake!"
"There's no snake!" Mitchell said.

He turned away from Charlie and pulled the covers back from the bed. I winced when he did it, half expecting to see the white mouth of the moccasin, but there was nothing there and Mitchell just kept going. He looked behind the shelves. He looked in the corners and in the closet. I even started to peek over his shoulder as he looked. He looked around the whole room before he finally lifted the trash basket off the floor and handed it to the dumbfounded Charlie.

"Why don't you look in here?" he said to Charlie. "Maybe the snake's in here."

Charlie's cigarette dangled from his lips as he held the trash can and Mitchell opened the door. Yellow light replaced the black in an instant and we all squinted at the same time.


We walked past Charlie who followed us out into the hall still holding the trash can.

"Don't get pissed!" he shouted after us. "It was just a gag. I was just having a little fun."

Mitchell flipped him the bird.

"Hey! Fuck you too!" Charlie shouted. "Fuck you too ass-holes!"

Charlie disappeared for an instant into Damien's room with the trashcan and then reappeared in the hallway without it.

"Hey everybody!" he shouted. "These two assholes just flipped me off!"

Two guys appeared in the hallway out of nowhere and looked in Charlie's direction. He pointed at the two of us and they looked our way.

"That's them!" he said. "Those are the two guys who flipped me off."

We quickened our pace and hurried through the tattered hallway and down the broken stairs. I had to hustle to keep up with Mitchell who was taking the steps two at a time. We
dashed through the broken front door and out into the sun of late afternoon with Charlie and his two friends hot on our tail. We ran as fast as we could until we were a block away from the Pi Beta house. We glanced back to see the three of them standing on their front porch, all of them flipping us off with both hands.

"We can slow down now," Mitchell said. "It doesn't look like Charlie and his buddies wanted us that bad. I guess that wasn't too smart, getting in his face like that in his own place, but the son-of-a-bitch pissed me off. He really pissed me off."

"How did you know there wasn't a snake?" I asked. I was happy to slow down. I'd had a hard time keeping up with Mitchell.

"It just didn't make any sense," he said. "Why would somebody have a snake crawling around in their room? How could they get a girl in there with a snake crawling around? It just didn't make any sense."

We entered the alley behind the Sigma Tau house.

"But how did you know for sure?"

"What do you mean?"

"How did you know for sure that there wasn't a snake?"

"Well, I guess I didn't know for absolute sure ... that there wasn't a snake I mean."

"What?"

"Well ... I mean ... I was pretty sure. It just didn't make any sense so I thought I'd call his bluff," he said, as we entered the Sigma Tau house and walked down the hallway toward the dining room.

I couldn't help but admire Mitchell. I'd always been such a gullible ass and I hated myself for it, but I couldn't seem to do anything about it. This guy was different. He came from a tiny town in the boondocks and drove a funny-looking Rambler with a mystery engine in it, and as far as anybody knew he didn't even have a first name. But he could call bullshit when he saw it, and he had the balls to back it up. I wondered if he would pledge the same house as me. I hoped so anyway.

We got into the dinner line with some of the other freshmen guys that were staying at the Sigma Tau House. There was a lot of nervous chatter that nobody listened to because all of us knew that pledging would start soon. The houses would start asking us to join any minute, and we all wondered what would happen.

"Brooks!"
I turned toward the sound of the voice and saw John Pursell standing in the doorway of
the living room. I'd been around him for three days now, and I still couldn't get used to the size of
him. He filled the doorway up, blotting out the light from the living room except for a little bit that
escaped around each side of his waist.
   "I need to talk to you," he said.
   I looked at Mitchell. I didn't want to go anywhere without him.
   "Can Mitchell come too?" I asked.
   "Just you," Pursell said. "I need to talk to you alone."
   I felt butterflies in my stomach as I followed Pursell down the stairs to the basement. He
took me straight to the president's room and I knew it was something important. I'd toured the
Sigma Tau house twice during my three days there, but I'd never been allowed even a peek
inside the president's room. I'd been able to see the door from the hallway, but it had always
been shut and I'd wondered what was in there. I'd wondered if I'd ever get to see it.
   I followed Pursell through the door and tried to find something to do with myself as I stood
in the middle of the room. I picked at my shirtsleeves and then moved my hands down to my
sides for just an instant before jamming them into my pockets. The shades had been pulled
down on the solitary window, and I had to wait for a moment in the darkened room for my eyes to
adjust. I could see Nick in the corner. He looked real serious. He leaned forward and put his
elbows on his knees and kept his hands folded together and he wouldn't even look me in the eye.
He sighed as he looked down between his feet at the floor and shook his head. I felt my stomach
sink.

7
Screwed

"Have a seat," Pursell said.
   He pulled a chair out from the corner of the room and I sat in it. Two other guys flanked
Nick. There was a skinny guy on the left who wore thick glasses. I didn't know his name but
everybody called him Crasher. He was in Nick's pledge class and he was pre-law. He was smart
and cynical and I thought that for sure he'd end up being a politician. On the other side of Nick
was the house steward. He was a short thick Italian with dark black hair that grew at an
astonishing rate and covered his entire body. I'd noticed that he started every day clean-shaven,
and by dinnertime he had a full beard. The hair on his chest and back and shoulders was as
thick as the hair on his head, sticking out from the collar of his shirt in thick black curly clumps.
Everybody called him Cougar. Even his mother called him Cougar, so just like Mitchell; Cougar had no first name. He didn't even have a last name ... he was just Cougar. All three of them looked at me now and all of them looked upset. Needless to say I didn't like the mood in the room. Pursell sat behind a big desk right in front of me.

"Brooks," he said. "I want you to understand one thing before we start."

"What's that?" I asked. My mouth felt as dry as wheat chaff.

"You see ... the house is pretty big. We've got a lot of guys who live here, and we all have to get along. That's why it takes more than just one guy to get a friend into the house." Nick sighed and hung his head down even lower. I felt sick to my stomach. Pursell continued.

"Anyway, we all vote on every new guy we're considering for membership, and everybody has to agree before we ask that guy to join."

"Everybody?" I asked, and Pursell nodded his head.

"Everybody," he answered, and now Cougar hung his head down too.

"If just one guy decides your not the right person for the Sigma Tau house then you're out. No matter how much everybody else likes you we can't let you in. We all have to agree to let you in. It just takes one guy. We just ... can't do anything about it."

Crasher leaned back in his chair and put his hands behind his neck. He shook his head back and forth and the little bit of light that was left in the room bounced off his thick glasses. Nick was really struggling. He shifted back and forth in his chair and kept his face toward the floor. I tried to catch his eye, but he wouldn't even look up at me. I felt like I might throw up. I started to think about how hard it was going to be to see him if I lived in the dorm. I'd figure out a way to do it. I'd hang around with him after practice. Maybe I could come over and visit him too.

"Do you understand me?" Pursell asked. "Do you understand how hard it is to get a guy in? How everybody has to agree?"

"I understand," I said. My voice was barely a whisper. "Can I come over and visit every now and then?"

"What?" Pursell asked.

"Come visit," I said again. "Can I come over now and then just to visit you guys?"

Pursell stood up. His head almost bumped the light fixture. He looked down at me and I felt like a dwarf. He put his hands on his hips.

"We're not here to send you off to some fucking dorm," he said. "We're here to ask you if you'll pledge The Sigma Tau House. We all want you ... every one of us. We all want you to join us."
Nick was looking up now and he was smiling along with Crasher and Cougar. They were all looking at me and waiting and then Pursell stuck a right hand out in front of me that was as big as a catcher's mitt.

"Join us," he said. "You'll never regret it."

I stood up and my hand disappeared into his. I felt the kind of happiness that's a combination of exhaustion and relief.

"Thanks," I said. "Thanks a lot ... count me in." The words barely escaped my lips before the whole room exploded.

Nick jumped up and let out a whoop, and then Cougar and Crasher jumped up too. They were suddenly surrounding me and slapping me on the back and I started shaking hands with every one of them. Nick's face appeared in front of mine and he picked me up and shook me like a rag doll.

"That's great you're in!" he said. "You were spending so much time looking at the other houses we were afraid you'd found someplace you liked better."

"But you told me to look."

"You didn't have to look so hard. You scared the shit out of us."

"I didn't ..." The rest of the sentence was knocked out of me when Crasher slapped me on the back too.

"Congratulations!" he said.

The room spun around and then Nick put me down and Pursell opened the door.

"Let's go," he said. "We've got to finish up before they eat dinner. You come with us Brooks, You'll need to help us choose your pledge class."

Nick put his arm around me and pulled me out into the hallway and the next thing I knew I was walking along with the four of them still not exactly sure what had happened.

"I'm in ... right?" I asked.

"You're in." He squeezed my shoulders and I felt the air get pushed out of my lungs.

"Where are we going?"

"To the chapter room," Nick said. "We're gonna figure out who were gonna screw tonight."

"Is that part of rush too?" I asked.

"I'm talking about the pledges ... you'll see. You need to help us decide who to pledge."

"You want me to help?"

"Yes."
"How many more do you have to pledge?"
"All of them ... your whole class."
"You haven't pledged anybody else yet?"
"Just you."

I stopped in the hallway and Nick stopped with me while the other's passed us and Crasher slapped me on the back again. I lunged forward from the blow and bounced back off Nick's chest.

"What a nugget!" Crasher said. "What a golden nugget."
"What's a nugget?" I asked.
"A top priority pledge. The best guy in the class."
"Are you talking about me?"

"I told them all about you," Nick said. "They know that you're my best friend and that you've got great grades and SAT scores. They know all about your music too. I've been telling them about you ever since I got here last year and we've wanted you to pledge since the first day of rush. Everybody knew about you, Brooks. You're the first person we asked."

The only thing I heard was the part about me being his best friend. When we were little we said it to each other a lot. All the way through grade school I'd hear him say it at least once a day, but as we got older we said it less often and then he went away to college and I'd spent my last year of high school wondering if it was still true anymore. I'd wondered if he might just drift away. It would have been easy for him to do, but it hadn't happened. We were still together and everything was just the same as it used to be, but it felt good to hear it again just the same. It felt better than pledging Sigma Tau. He put his arm around my shoulders and we walked into the chapter room.

I sat with my new fraternity brothers around the perimeter of the chapter room on a hard wooden bench that backed up to a wood-paneled wall. The floor was brown painted concrete with a circular drain in the middle. I'd noticed that all of the floors in the basement had a circular drain in the middle that disappeared into a black hole that carried the beer away. Essentially all of the beer was consumed in the basement, it wasn't even allowed on the other floors, so the drains made sense even if that wasn't their original intention.

On the walls of the chapter room there were skins tacked out on the wood paneling. Exactly what kind of skins I didn't know, as I'd never asked any of the members and I doubted I'd get a knowledgeable answer anyway. They were the skins of some sort of small furry woodland creatures that had been forever fated to bear the score of a football game scorched onto their
hides. The games were played in the distant past between the university and some other institution of higher learning in another state. Of course, the skins on our wall were victories for our school, but I was sure the results of our failures had been burned into the hide of another poor animal and tacked to the wall of a different chapter of Sigma Tau at another university. It was bragging rights from one year to the next among the schools, and unfortunately our furry friends had to pay the price. I rationalized the whole thing by convincing myself that the hides would have been used to make gloves or jackets, and most certainly would have been long gone by now as many of the skins were ten or even twenty years old. Most of them were curling up around the tacks that held them to the walls of our chapter room.

Pursell walked through the center of the room and sat down in the president’s chair on the south wall. It was a black painted chair made of plywood and built up a foot and a half above the others. When Pursell sat in it he towered above the rest of us. He took a gavel that rested beside him and smacked the armrest on the chair. Everybody stopped talking the instant the gavel hit the wood.

"Let's come to order!" he said, and the room fell suddenly silent. "We just pledged Brooks ..."

I couldn't tell what he said next because the whole room jumped up and there was another round of backslapping and congratulations from a bunch of guys sitting around me. I couldn't remember most of their names. Pursell whacked the plywood again and everybody settled back down.

"We've got a lot of work to do because we've got to start screwing the pledges right after they finish dinner, so let's get started."

Pursell started reading through a list of names, some of which I knew and some of which I didn't. He'd call out a name and then everybody would listen to the comments from the people who had met the guy. The discussions were always studded with the same kind of jargon.

"He's a nugget," was the term for a good recruit, a solid endorsement by the member. "He's a golden nugget," was the highest compliment possible. It was usually a guy who'd played high school football or basketball, and the discussion eventually ended when somebody jumped up and shouted, "Well let's screw him then!" Pursell would then ask the group if there were any "dings."

Sometimes there would be a set of guys who were enthusiastic about a good "screwing," while another set of guys were dead set against it with a solid "ding." A lively and sometimes heated argument followed, and there was usually a bit of name-calling amongst the brotherhood.
But the "dings" always held up. If somebody had a ding for any reasonable cause, the person in question was not asked to pledge.

I was not anxious to participate since I didn't know most of the names in question, and I was still recovering from the anxiety of my own "screwing" just a short time earlier. The names came and went and I was happy to trust the judgement of the brotherhood to supply me with a good group of guys for my pledge class. I perked up though, when I heard Pursell call out Mitchell's name.

"What's his last name anyway?"

The question came from a member who sat straight across from me. He had long blonde hair and a handlebar mustache that he constantly twirled around his index finger. He was known as Booby ... something about a particularly memorable date his freshman year.

"I don't know," Pursell said. "He didn't write his first name on the registration form. It just says Mitchell."

"Does anybody know what his first name is?" Booby asked.
No one answered him. All of us just looked at each other and shrugged.

"What's the deal with his Rambler anyway? What kind of guy drives around in a sooped-up Rambler?" This question came from a tall blonde guy sitting along the west wall. I'd talked to him a few times during rush. He was from California and he looked every bit the beach boy. He constantly groomed his hair with a black comb he kept in his hip pocket, and I'd noticed he never passed a mirror, or even his own reflection in a window, without stopping to check himself out. He was called "The Faceman" or simply "Face," and he drove a Z-28 Camaro.

"Maybe we should check out what's under the hood before we pledge him?"

This comment came from a guy named Dudley who sat on the other side of Nick. He was a junior pre-med who spoke so quietly that nobody could ever understand him. I heard Nick laugh, but everybody else in the room just looked perplexed.

"What did you say Dudley?" The Faceman asked. "Shit! I wish you'd talk louder." Pursell smacked the plywood again and everybody shut up.

"Has anybody spent any time with this guy?" Pursell asked.

The room fell silent and I waited for someone to speak up. A guy on the opposite side of the room mentioned that he'd talked to Mitchell after dinner one night and he seemed okay. There were a few other unenthusiastic "okay's." Once or twice the word "nugget" was mentioned, but nobody used the word "golden nugget," and soon Pursell was looking back at his list.

"I know him," I said.
The words had come out of my mouth before I could stop them, and now the whole room looked at me. It made the back of my neck feel hot.

“Do you have something to say Brooks?” Pursell asked, and I was stuck. There was no way out of it.

“I don’t know if it matters,” I said. “But I’ve spent a lot of time with him.”

“New pledges can’t vote.” The Faceman said. There was a murmur through the crowd and the guys nodded their heads in agreement.

“That’s right,” Pursell said. “New pledges can’t vote.”

“They can’t ding or vote, but they can give their opinion,” Nick said. “I think we should listen to what he has to say.” There was another murmur of general agreement and nodding of heads.

“We might miss out on a good guy,” Nick continued. “I trust Brooks. We should listen to him.”

I felt everybody’s eyes on me, and I knew I had to think fast. What could I say about Mitchell anyway? I’d only known him for a few days.

“He was a baseball player,” I said. “He was a pretty good one too.” The brother’s nodded their heads in approval. “But that’s not the reason we should pledge him ... if we do.” The membership looked perplexed and I continued.

“I think we should pledge him because he stood up for me when he really didn’t have to. I think he’d do the same for all of us if he were a member. He’s a guy you can count on, and that’s all that really matters isn’t it? I mean ... it doesn’t matter if he played baseball or not, as long as he’s there when you need him ... as long as he does his share. I think Mitchell will do that, and then some. I think he’s the kind of guy that might not get a lot of attention from some of the other people on campus, but he’ll keep the house going. He’ll be the kind of guy that gets the work done, and he’ll stand up for you when you need him to.”

The room was completely silent now. They all continued to look at me. I felt like I needed to say one more thing.

“I haven’t met anybody else so far that I’d rather have for a pledge brother. If I were a member he’d be my first choice ... he’d be my golden nugget.”

I waited for a response from the group. I wondered if I’d said too much. I wondered if I’d overstepped my bounds and lost the chance to pledge Mitchell. I waited until Nick said.

“Let’s screw him.”

Dudley was next, right on the other side of Nick.
“Yeah! Let’s screw him,” he said.
“What did you say Dudley?” The Faceman asked.
“Let’s screw his lights out!” Cougar shouted.

Now everybody was on the bandwagon. Crasher jumped up from the wooden bench, his thick glasses were starting to get fogged up from all the warm bodies in the room. He punched the air with a scrawny fist.

“Screw him! ... Screw him! ... Screw him! ...” He shouted, and everybody else joined in. They shouted over and over again until the gavel hit the plywood and the racket stopped instantly. Nobody messed with Pursell, not even Nick.

“All right! All right!” he said. “Let’s do this right.... Does anybody have a ding?”
I held my breath and waited, but nobody said a word.

“All right then,” Pursell said. “Let’s do it. Who wants to do the screwing?”
“I think Brooks should screw him,” Nick said. “I think this guy should be his first.”
“But I’ve never screwed anybody!” I protested.
“Will give you some help,” Pursell said. “Nick ... you and Crasher help Brooks.” I watched Crasher rub his hands together with glee.

There were a few other names that came and went. I couldn't pay attention to them because I was too preoccupied with the whole process of screwing Mitchell. Pursell looked at his watch and cracked the gavel against the plywood one last time.

“That’s it!” he said. “They should be getting done with dinner now. Does everybody know who they’re supposed to screw?”

Everybody in the room nodded their heads.

“Okay then ... let’s do it.”

I walked with Nick and Crasher out of the chapter room. We planned our strategy and walked up the stairs to the first floor. The freshmen were leaving the dining room and I saw Mitchell leaning against the big post in the center of the living room. He smiled when he saw me, and asked me what had happened.

“They asked me to pledge,” I said.

“That’s good,” he said. “I hope you like it here.” He looked like he meant it.

“They want to talk to you too,” I said, and Nick and Crasher came up behind me right on cue.

“Maybe it would be better if you came along too,” Crasher said to me. “Maybe it would make things a little easier on Mitchell.”
The smile disappeared from Mitchell's face.

"Do I have to?" I asked. "It's not really my business ... I just pledged."

Now Mitchell was starting to look worried.

"I think it would be best," Nick said. "For Mitchell's sake."

We went downstairs to the basement and marched into Cougar's room and I shut the door behind us. Crasher pulled out a chair and asked Mitchell to sit down. Nick and I sat right in front of him.

"Before I tell you this you have to understand something," Nick said.

"Okay," Mitchell responded. He couldn't keep himself from fidgeting in his chair.

"When we pledge a freshman, everybody has to agree. If just one guy wants you out, there's nothing we can do about it; we can't let you in the house. It has to be unanimous. Do you understand?"

I saw Mitchell's Adam's apple move up and down as he swallowed hard. "I understand," he said. His voice was barely a whisper.

I sighed and folded my hands together just like Nick had done when I got screwed. Then I lowered my head and looked down at the floor between my feet and tried to hide the smile on my face.

8
Wake Up

It was six o'clock Monday morning and I looked up with bewilderment at the wake up board. It was a big piece of lacquered plywood hanging on the wall near the stairs on the second floor. I'd received the dubious honor of wake up duty on the first day of school. Alarm clocks weren't allowed on the sleeping porch. Too many people slept too close together to allow that. Instead of listening to seventy alarm clocks going off at different times each morning, the freshmen saw to it that the brothers got out of bed in time for school. All of us depended on one alarm clock and one freshman to get us to class on time.

The big wooden board had a vertical row on the left-hand side that listed the time in thirty-minute intervals. The earliest slot was at six o'clock and the last one was at eight-thirty. To the right of each time slot a row of round nametags dangled from small brass hooks. It was my job
to wake up each of the names at the specified time. I held a large diagram of the sleeping porch scrawled on poster board with little rectangles that represented the bunk beds. Each rectangle contained two names.

Some of the tags were white. That meant I was obligated only to wake up the owner and hand over the tag. Other tags were red. A red tag meant I had to get the guy out of bed, and make sure he put his feet on the floor before I gave him the tag. I'd gotten this job because I was a freshman, or a frog as the upper classmen called us. I was starting to learn that the frogs did most of the day-to-day work around the house. This particular job also helped us learn the names of the seventy-two guys we lived with.

Some of the tags contained first and last names. Others contained just one or the other. Most of the tags contained a nickname that distinguished that guy from the rest of the members. Names like Poopsie, Cougar, Woody, and The Faceman dotted the wake up board and I had no idea who many of them were. I took the tags off the board for the six o'clock wake up and grabbed the poster board diagram. I walked up the stairs toward the room of slumbering members.

The swinging door creaked when I went through it, and the coolness of the mid-September morning greeted me as it blew in through the open windows on the south end of the porch. Even though I'd remembered to bring my bathrobe and slippers from home, I couldn't help but shudder when I felt the breeze hit my face. I fumbled with the tags and poster board as I shuffled along the thin strip of a carpet that covered the linoleum floor between two long rows of bunk beds. I picked a tag and looked at the name ... it said just Maxwell. I looked down at the diagram and found his name occupying a top bunk on the south side of the porch. It was a white tag. I walked over to the bunk and found a tassel of hair sticking out one end of the covers. I could hear Maxwell snoring comfortably in his cocoon of blankets as I shook him and whispered.

"Maxwell! Time to get up. White tag. It's six o'clock."

Maxwell's hand slowly reached out from beneath the covers to take the white tag that dangled in front of his nose. Nothing else on his body moved.

"Thanks frog," he said from beneath the covers.

I turned to go to the next bunk.

"Hey frog, have you woken up Woody yet?" Maxwell asked.

I stopped in my tracks. "Not yet," I answered. I didn't even know who Woody was.

"Watch out for Woody," Maxwell warned. "Make sure you're not too close to him when he wakes up."
“Okay, thanks a lot,” I said, as I turned toward the next bunk, and looked through the tags in my hand. None of them belonged to Woody.

I moved as quickly as I could from bed to bed and managed to wake everybody up before six o’clock, but the red tags were a problem. Some of the guys, especially those in the top bunks, didn’t want to put their feet on the floor, but I was insistent. Some tried to negotiate, but I didn’t budge. I made sure their feet touched the floor before I gave them the tag. I found just enough time to get a cup of coffee before dashing upstairs to start the six thirty round. I felt much more confident the second time around.

At seven o’clock I woke up John Pursell on the eastern end of the porch. The springs of his bunk were stretched out tight from his weight, making it look more like a hammock than a bed. His head was against the front of the bunk, and his feet dangled off the other end. I shook him, and watched the whole bed sway back and forth. I assumed he always slept on the bottom bunk. Nobody would want to sleep beneath him for fear of being crushed unexpectedly in the middle of the night when the springs gave way. His head popped out from under the covers almost immediately.

“Seven o’clock John ... wake up,” I whispered.

He took the white tag. “Thanks,” he said.

I liked seeing a familiar face. I smiled and Pursell smiled back as he swung his legs over the side of the bed. The whole bunk bed swayed back and forth when he moved.

“Hey Brooks,” he said. “Have you woken up Woody yet?”

“Not yet.”

“Watch out for Woody.”

“I’ve heard,” I answered, as I fumbled with the tags. “Why does everybody keep talking about Woody?”

“Don’t worry, you’ll find out. He’s always been tough to wake up in the morning, but nobody’s been hurt yet … at least not too bad anyway. Just keep your distance. That’s all you have to do.”

At seven thirty the tag came up. It was a red one marked only with the word “Woody.” I found the bed on the diagram, and marched to the western end of the sleeping porch.

He slept on the top bunk. I was relieved to see that the body beneath the covers wasn’t very big. A soft snore came out from one end of the bed. I approached him, and shook his body at arm’s length.

“Seven thirty,” I whispered. “Red tag.”
Nothing happened. Woody didn't budge. The mound beneath the covers continued to snore comfortably, so I tried it again. I shook the sleeping body harder and talked a little louder. "Come on Woody! Let's go! It's seven thirty and you've got a red tag." But he still didn't move.

I laid down the poster board diagram, and placed the tags on top. I moved closer to the sleeping form and used both hands to shake the body. I spoke directly into his ear.

"Woody," I said, as I shook the body hard. "Red tag!"

The words barely left my lips before the body beneath the covers exploded. He came off the bed as if lifted up by rockets. His body elevated and his arms, legs, and head thrashed about so uncontrollably I saw only a blur of flesh and hair. He crashed down on the bed, and swung his feet around the side at the same time. He moved so quickly and so violently that he nearly knocked me over. The poster board and nametags scattered across the floor as I stumbled backward. Woody reached for his ears and cradled his head between his hands. His hair stuck out through the spaces between his fingers. His body was long and lean and powerful, with muscles that were hard and well defined beneath thin pale skin. His penis stuck straight up through the fly of his boxer shorts. Woody had a morning hard on, and as he sat in the top bunk his dick quivered in the air two feet from the end of my nose. It was the most enormous pecker I'd ever seen. It was easily ten inches long, and as big around as a giant cucumber. I was dumfounded. I couldn't help but stare at Woody's enormous dick.

"Red tag," I stammered as I held out his tag. "You've got to put your feet on the floor."

He sighed as he held his head in his hands. "The red tag was a mistake," he said. "I meant to put up a white tag."

"Sorry Woody, you've got to put your feet on the floor."

Woody looked down, and then gently placed his pecker into his shorts. The boxers now looked like a miniature circus tent, supported by an overly tall and thick center post.

"What's the matter frog?" he asked. "Haven't you ever seen a pecker before?"

"Yeah, sure I have ... just not one like that!" I stammered.

He shook his head and crawled off the bunk. He took the red tag, and looked down again at his shorts sticking out in front of him.

"It happens every morning," he said. "A morning pee is the only way I can get the thing back in my pants." He shook his head again. "I'm famous around here because of my dick. Everybody calls it Python, but the Goddamned thing is just a big nuisance most of the time."
It was starting to find it's way out of the fly in his boxer shorts again. The head of it was slipping past the slit of cloth in the front. He stuffed it back inside his shorts and I watched him waddle toward the head, supporting his pecker with his right hand and scratching his head with his left. I picked up the wake up board and tried to rearrange the tags. I took one more look at Woody before scurrying off to the next bed. It was a red tag for somebody named Poopsie.

I ran down to the second floor and showered at seven forty five. After the eight o'clock wake up I went to the first floor and lined up with Nick for breakfast. There was cold cereal in large boxes stacked out on the dining room table but we didn’t eat it. Instead we got in line with a bunch of other guys right outside the kitchen door.

“What’s the matter with the cereal?” I asked.

“Nothing.” Nick answered. “The cereal’s there for the guys who oversleep. The best breakfast is from the kitchen between six thirty and eight. That’s when Margaret works the grill. If you want a good breakfast you get in line. It’s always longest at eight.”

“Okay.”

“How was wake up?” he asked.

“I was able to get Woody out of bed.”

“Did you meet Python?”

“Oh yeah,” I said. “That’s a serious pecker.”

“Biggest in the house for sure,” Nick said. “Probably the biggest on campus.”

“How often do I get stuck with wake up duty anyway?”

“About once a month or so.”

“Once a month will be plenty,” I said, as we entered the kitchen. That’s when I got my first good look at Margaret.

Even though I’d heard about her, I wasn’t sure what to expect. What I saw wasn’t pretty. As a matter of fact, she was more than just a little bit intimidating. She stood in front of the grill with her arms crossed. She held a large metal spatula in her right hand that stuck up in front of her left shoulder. A white cotton apron covered her from chest to thighs, and it was splotched with grease from the morning’s work. A Camel straight hung from the corner of her mouth, and she glared at me from behind a haze of smoke. A cup of coffee steamed in front of her on a stainless steel counter. I thought her eyes brightened a little when she saw Nick.

"Morning Nuisance," she said. "How about some eggs?"

“Who’s Nuisance?” I asked Nick.

“She always calls me that,” he answered.
The tools of her trade surrounded her. There was a large stainless steel sink right behind her left hip. The window over the sink rendered a view of the back wall of Sigma Phi Omega sorority. The big counter between she and us was littered with little bits of fried egg, and fragments of hash browns that lay at the ends of tiny tracks of smeared grease. To the right was a huge oven, and two stainless steel refrigerators were in the corner to her left. A dishwasher occupied the wall between the oven and the refrigerators. The whole kitchen looked spotless.

"Give me two over easy and some hash browns," Nick said. "I'll take some toast too."
"You can get your own fucking toast," she said. "I'll be damned if I start making your toast." She took a half ladle of cooking oil and poured it on the big grill. "Who's your friend?" She asked.

"This is the guy I told you about," he said. "This is Brooks."
"What will you have?" She asked me. She turned her head halfway around her right shoulder as she spoke, and I noticed a big ash dangling from the end of her cigarette. It bounced up and down as she spoke.

"I'll have the same as Nick," I said. "And it's nice to meet you Margaret."

"Likewise," she grunted, as she expertly cracked four eggs, and laid them down on the grill without breaking the yolk or spilling even the smallest flake of the shell. She quickly scooped up two piles of shredded potatoes and placed them next to the eggs in neat piles. I remembered my dad's advice.

"You sure do keep a clean kitchen Margaret," I said. She looked up from her grill.

"I'm a specialist," she said. "I'm not here to clean the fucking place. I'm here to cook." The end of her cigarette gyrated wildly as she spoke, but the ash stayed put. Nick almost choked on his orange juice.

"Whatever you say," I said. I was relieved to see her lips curl up into a yellow-toothed grin around the butt of her cigarette. She looked back down at the eggs.

We watched her cook with a fury. Grease splattered and sputtered from beneath the eggs and potatoes, and eventually rolled into the gutter at the front of the grill. I watched her cigarette hang over the grill; the ash clinging precariously to the paper as it dangled over our eggs.

"I think her ash is gonna end up in our eggs," I whispered to Nick, but to my surprise he only chuckled.
Margaret turned toward us and held out two identical plates. The eggs were perfectly cooked, and the potatoes grilled to a light golden brown. She held both plates under her cigarette which now had an enormous ash bending in a gentle curve from its own weight. I couldn't take my eyes off of it. She slid the plates across the counter and then gently took the cigarette from her lips. She moved it over the plastic dinner plate she used for an ashtray and tapped the top once with her index finger. The whole ash fell off in one big clump. She stuck the butt back into her mouth and smiled with her yellow teeth again.

"Welcome to Sigma Tau," she said to me. "Are you a poker player by chance?"

I was still staring at the pile of ashes on the plastic plate. "Well ... not exactly," I said. "But I've played it a few times."

"Come down to the dining room when you don't have anything else to do. I'll be glad to teach you how to play." She said, as she looked at Nick and winked.

I turned with Nick toward the dining room and heard her shout toward the line behind us: "Woody! My dream date! How about some eggs?"

9
First Day

The sun crawled over the tops of the buildings on the eastern side of the campus as Nick and I walked toward class on the first day of school. The co-eds from the sororities were swarming around us on both sides of Greek row. They poured out of the old houses in all sizes, shapes, and colors, bouncing down the steps of the front porches in small packs of two or three and joining the migration to the top of the hill. We took our time, enjoying the weather and the scenery as we walked.

"Are you nervous?" Nick asked me.

"About what?"

"About college of course! This is your first day!"

"No."

"Not even a little bit?"

"No ... I'm not nervous," I said, as I turned my head to watch a blonde come out of the house to our right and trot down the stairs of the front porch. She waved and I was about to wave back before I realized she was waving at Nick and not me. I watched him wave back.

"Who's she?" I asked.
"An Alpha Phi. She’s nice enough but not your type."
The girl smiled as she walked across the lawn in front of us and I smiled back.
"What do you mean not my type?" I asked.
"She’s not for you," he said. “You can do better."
"What are you talking about?" I asked. “I can’t even get a date. I haven’t had a date in my whole life ... not a real one anyway."
"What about that girl I fixed you up with your junior year?"
"She doesn't count," I said. "The only reason she went with me was because she liked you. She talked about you the whole time I was with her."
"I didn’t know that."
"It’s true,” I said. “I felt like an appurtenance the whole night."
"What the hell is an appurtenance?"
"You know ... an appendage."
"What do you mean by that?"
"That's the part that's left over."
"That's bullshit. She liked you."
"You're wrong Nick. She liked you."
I punched him in the arm but it hurt me more than it did him. I shook my hand in pain as we both turned our attention back to the Alpha Phi. She held a notebook in her left arm and her ponytail bounced up and down each time she took a step. She wore a white short-sleeved shirt and khaki shorts. We were close enough to see the fine blonde hairs on the back of her thighs. The hair stopped just below the hem of her shorts. The transition to smooth hair-less skin was barely noticeable. I couldn't help but notice how her legs extended down in gentle curves until they disappeared into the tops of her socks.
"Why wouldn't she be for me?" I asked.
"Trust me," he said.
"I'll be lucky if I ever find a girl who'll go out with me."
"Don't worry. There's lot's of girls on campus. There'll be somebody who appreciates you. Give 'em a little credit and you'll see."
"Whatever you say, Nick."
We walked in silence, keeping an unconscious pace with the rhythm of the legs on the girl from Alpha Phi.
"Sometimes I get nervous," Nick said. "In school I mean."
"What?"
"I get nervous in school, especially on the first day."

I looked up from the legs of the Alpha Phi. I looked at him as if I'd never seen him before.
"So this is what you look like when you're nervous." I said. "I've never seen you when you were nervous."
"I'm not kidding."
"It's normal," I said.
"You don't get nervous, you just told me so."
"I guess I get as nervous as the next guy. I never really thought about it."
"So you get nervous then?"
"Yeah ... sure ... I guess so."
"That's good," Nick said. "I was wondering if I was the only guy who gets nervous in class. Sometimes I feel like I can't even think."

I looked again at the back of the girl from Alpha Phi. "I've never seen you get nervous in my whole life," I told him. "As a matter of fact, when most people are starting to get nervous, It seems to me you're usually just starting to get interested. I'm sure everybody's nervous on the first day of school."

We walked in silence for a half block, our attention again diverted to the legs of the girl from Alpha Phi.
"What's her name?" I asked.
"I can't remember."
"If you can't even remember her name then how do you know she's not my type?"
"She's not smart enough for you."
"I don't care if she's smart," I said, as I watched her hips move gently back and forth with each step. "I'm sure she's smart enough ... we could find something to talk about."
"I don't think you're interested in conversation," he said.

He definitely had a point. Every time I was around a girl like the one from Alpha Phi I felt all mixed up. I wasn't sure what I wanted.
"Do you think there's something wrong with me?" I asked. "I mean ... every time I even get close to a girl I can't think of anything other than ... well ... you know."
"There's nothing wrong with you," he said. "That's normal. Just like getting nervous on the first day of school."
"Whatever you say."
It was all part of the girls/sex problem again. I was beginning to wonder if I’d ever get over it. It seemed like I was spending half my life walking around with an out-of-control hard-on while I thought about having sex with some girl I didn’t even know. We stayed directly behind the girl from Alpha Phi and I couldn’t think of anything else until she turned off the main walkway toward the south end of campus. We stopped at a corner.

"Which way to the science building?" I asked.

He pointed toward a sidewalk that meandered back and forth through the center of a courtyard.

"Walk past the music hall and you'll run right into it," he said.

I turned right on the pathway and walked away. My pace quickened now that the Alpha Phi was gone. I stopped and turned around to the sound of his voice.

"Brooks!"

"What Nick?"

"You’re nervous too aren’t you? Maybe just a little bit?"

"Sure Nick. Everybody’s nervous. It's normal."

I turned and walked away again. I took only a few steps before something made me stop and look back one more time. He hadn't moved. He still stood there in the same spot watching me. I raised my hand and waved. He waved back and I turned around again and walked to class without looking back a third time.

I passed the music hall on my way. It was on the right and it looked worn and tired in its little lot just across the street from the library. I watched as two or three kids entered the building, and I listened to the notes that drifted out through the windows from the instruments inside. I controlled the urge to stop and listen. I didn't have the time. I couldn't let the music get in the way of what I needed to do, so I marched straight ahead to the science building which was a complete contrast to the music hall.

The science building bustled with activity as students streamed in and out through the monolithic front doors. Some of them dashed down the sidewalk while others frantically twisted the locks on their bicycles near the entrance. It was a brand new building and the smooth clean reinforced concrete formed crisp geometric lines that looked cold-hearted compared to the music hall. It was stark and barren and looked like it lacked a soul. I entered the front door and took the stairs to the second floor. I took a left at the end of the hallway and walked right into one of the biggest lecture halls on campus.
There were four hundred kids in the room waiting for the first day of organic chemistry. There was tension in the room too. I could smell it and hear it and taste it thick in the air. Organic chemistry was an academic gauntlet. It was a bitch as the saying went on Greek Row, and for most of the kids the goal was a B or a C. The fact that the pre-meds took the course only made it worse.

I'd heard a lot about the pre-meds. Every time the word was mentioned I could see people’s backs stiffen a little bit and a grimace come over their faces. Nobody liked the pre-meds. They ruined everything. They ruined the grading curve and made it impossible for anybody to enjoy a class. I'd known the type in high school. They were the pushy ones who liked the academic competition. Their sense of self worth was wrapped up in a letter grade on a piece of paper at the end of every semester. They were few and untested in high school, but now that they’d moved up a notch and formed a new group. They weren’t just ass-holes anymore. They were a whole new collection of super ass-holes, and I was right in the middle of them. Each one of them knew that organic chemistry was the ultimate prize. All of them wanted to reach out for the ten A's given each semester. For the pre-meds, the A's in organic chemistry were like ten academic brass rings.

Freshman year had weeded out the pretender’s. The students with a pre-med pipe dream had fallen to the wayside with C's in biology and inorganic chemistry. For the sophomores that remained, organic chemistry represented the next hurdle. A good grade would mean a highly cherished trophy for their academic transcript. For those at the highest level of performance, it would confirm their place in the academic hierarchy. For the student who tip-toed on the precipice between acceptance and rejection, a good grade might push them over the top, and send them skidding down the slippery and treacherous slope of medical school. They all knew what was at stake. That’s why they were trying to check out the competition and hide their fear at the same time.

I was the ringer in the class. I’d challenged out of first year chemistry in high school, so I felt like I was sneaking in right under their noses as I took a seat near the front. I didn’t mind being the new guy. That was okay with me, because in spite of the anxiety in the room, in spite of the size of the class and the strange faces, I felt good for the first time since I’d left home. This was a lot easier than everything else I’d been through. This was easier than rush and getting screwed and watching Margaret smoke cigarettes. This was easier than wake up call.

I could compete in a classroom. Confidence was not my constant companion in life, far from it, but in this place confidence filled me up. I didn’t intend to make friends with these guys. I
wasn’t there to join the club. I was there to crush them under my scrawny little academic thumb. I was there to set a standard they couldn’t match. I was there to cause them anguish and pain and give them nightmares.

I opened my notebook, and pulled the pen from my shirt pocket. I listened to the lecture and fell into a relaxed state of concentration as the information marched right into my head. I forgot about the girl from Alpha Phi. I forgot about the students at the music hall. I forgot about the house, and wake up call, and the ash on Margaret’s cigarette. My mind became clear and focused for the first time since I’d left home.

It was a beautiful place, this state of mind. It was relaxing and exhilarating at the same time. Hours turned to minutes and seconds to days. It had always been like that. It had been like that ever since I could remember. I didn’t question it because I’d never known anything else.

Most people assumed I was smart, and I guess that was part of it. I was smarter than the average guy that’s for sure, but by far the bigger part was the concentration. It took me places most people would never know … and in a place like this, I could turn it on and off like a switch.

10
Tweener

Jim Fitzpatrick wore gray shorts and a white short-sleeved shirt trimmed in red. His thick silver hair stuck out from the back of his baseball cap. He had a flat Irish face that framed a wide nose and a golden front tooth that exposed his eternal optimism. He didn’t walk. He strutted. At fifty years of age he had a belly on him, and he carried himself as if he were proud of it. He pushed that big gut out in front of him and swaggered across the field and twirled a silver whistle around his index finger as he looked back at the line of players crouched in a three-point stance forty yards away.

“This game is about speed ladies!” He shouted. His voice echoed off the empty bleachers and the concrete walls of the buildings surrounding the field. The players remained motionless in their stance. “Some of you have it, and some of you don’t," he shouted. "I need to find out who has it, and who doesn’t." He paused as the players waited. "Some of you will be left behind today…. A few will move on to the next level. Without speed, you'll never play this game."

He placed the silver whistle in his mouth and blew it. The players exploded from the line. They strained under thick canvas pants and cotton jerseys that were heavy with sweat. They stretched themselves out to meet the finish line where coach Fitzpatrick stood. To be first was to
be recognized, and to be recognized was to earn that most precious of commodities ... playing

time.

I watched the guy next to Nick pull steadily away. Nick ran with every ounce of effort he
could muster and leaned into the finish line, almost stumbling as he crossed it, but the taller man
finished two yards ahead of him. They had run the drill ten times in the last ten minutes and the
result had been the same every single time.

It had been a year since I’d been able to watch him play. He’d been on the freshman team
last year, and the games were always played on a week night at some community college in a
boon-doggle town just like the one we grew up in. I’d missed watching him play. I’d made it a
point to schedule my classes so I could hustle over to the field right after biology lab and catch a
little bit of practice.

"Some of you aren't fast enough." Fitzpatrick shouted. He walked past them toward a
new starting line. He spun his whistle around his finger again and the afternoon sunshine
sparkled off his golden tooth. "You might be fast ... faster than anybody else on the block, but
some of you aren't fast enough to play here. Not in division 1-A."

I watched Nick walk back to the new starting line and join the man running with him. They
both placed their hands on their knees as they panted and watched the coach swagger away in
the opposite direction.

"Let's try it again ladies!" Fitzpatrick shouted as he stopped at the new finish line. "I'm
starting to get an idea of who can run."

Both of them got down in their three-point stance and waited for the whistle. This time
they left the line together and they stayed even for the first ten yards, but as the taller man
lengthened his stride, he steadily pulled away again and beat Nick by three yards.

Fitzpatrick stood with his hands on his hips as he watched them finish. Nick staggered
back to the line with his faster companion and they both rested again with their hands on their
knees. Nick spit through his facemask, and the thick saliva hung there on the plastic crossbar for
a few seconds before it slowly dripped to the grass.

"All of you are too small for the line," Fitzpatrick shouted as he walked to the new finish
line forty yards away. "Because you're too small for the line the only thing left for you is a skill
position. I don't like the term skill position. I don't like it because it implies that linemen don't have
skill. I was a lineman. I never liked little guys who played skill positions. I always thought they
were just small and weak, but they all had one thing I didn't have ... they could run."
I wondered about Fitzpatrick. He’d been at the university for five years now, and he’d won a few big games. There was talk in the papers that maybe he was looking for a new job, and his name had come up in the rumor mill when a few coaching positions at some of the big-name universities had come up. He’d denied everything of course, college coaches always do. He’d said he was happy where he was. “There’s no place I’d rather be than this university,” he’d said to the news media. Those were his exact words.

"Let's do it again ladies!" he shouted as he stood at the new finish line. "Let's see who can run!"

He blew the whistle again, and this time Nick got a good start. He tried to lengthen his stride, but the guy next to him pulled even at twenty-five yards. I felt myself falling behind right along with Nick, but neither of us could go any faster, and we finished a yard behind. He put his hands on his hips and walked back to the line.

I guess I expected practice at the university to be just like it had been in high school … but it wasn’t. All of the player’s were a lot bigger, but that wasn’t the main difference. The biggest difference was the fact that they played the game at a different speed. Nick had always been the strongest and the fastest and the toughest guy on the field. He’d just run away from people, or else he’d run right over them. But now it was different. They played a different game at the university.

Fitzpatrick stopped forty yards away. "Some of you are going to get caught in between," he shouted. "Some of you are going to be too small for the line and too slow for a skill position. You'll be a tweeener and there'll be no playing time for you." Fitzpatrick had found his new finish line. Nick took his stance. "Let's go ladies!" Fitzpatrick shouted. "One more time!" He put the silver whistle between his teeth and blew.

Nick came off the line at the instant the whistle blew. The man next to him had to strain to keep up, but he maintained the pace and eventually pulled in front to finish two yards ahead. Both men walked back to the line and rested their hands on their knees again.

There was never any debate in our small town about who was the best athlete we ever produced. The only thing about Nick people could find to argue about was just what sport he was best at. Little kids debated it while they sat on the curb and ate ice cream in the summer. Old men debated it every Saturday morning at the barbershop. It was discussed in hardware stores on Saturday’s and in church on Sunday’s and at the corner cafe during the week. A feature on the topic even occupied most of the sports page one Sunday during Nick’s senior year.
Most people maintained it was football. That’s where most of his press came from, and his feats on the gridiron were the ones most remembered by our little town. He was a two time all-state player and his senior year he was all state on both defense and offense. Only two other players had ever accomplished that before, both of them so old and their time so long ago that nobody remembered or cared who they were. The university recruited him, but very few other division 1-A schools seemed interested. We didn’t think he’d gotten the attention he deserved from the big-name programs in the country, so choosing the university had been an easy choice.

There were some people who thought his best sport was track and field. Their argument was that he had more natural ability in that sport than any other. Their opinion was based on potential rather than outright achievement because track and field was only an afterthought for Nick. He never trained or practiced for it. He just showed up for the meets and won everything in site. He thought it was boring for the most part, and he turned out just for something to do in the spring. Baseball was the only thing Nick found more boring than track and field, and that’s the main reason he ended up winning the state championship in the javelin and the discus his junior and senior year.

"Let’s get ready girls!" Fitzpatrick shouted. He had made the walk to the new finish line forty yards away. "Show me who can run!"

For whatever it was worth, my opinion was that he was the best wrestler who ever lived. Most people in our little town didn’t know anything about wrestling. Wrestling matches always took place in dark smelly little gyms that were empty except for a few of the parents and an occasional girlfriend who wanted to give the impression that she was interested in it. We always had a lousy team and our coach had never even wrestled a single match in his whole life. Nobody understood the rules, and the newspaper reserved only a small corner of the sports page for the match scores. Most people ignored the wrestling team until the tournaments started, and then they only bothered to read about it because Nick was winning … but we knew. The other guys on the team knew and I knew, and especially the competition knew that we were seeing something special every time Nick stepped onto the mat.

He was a warrior who seemed to like the action in empty smelly little gyms just as much as he did at the state tournament. For some reason I liked it better when there were less people around too. It made it easier for me to pretend that I was he. I liked to imagine that all those muscles belonged to me. I liked to imagine that I was half Tarzan and half Kazaam! I was as strong as the Hulk and as fast as The Flash! I was an unstoppable combination of power and speed that destroyed everything in its path. I was the guy everybody was scared shitless of. I
was the guy everybody ducked … the guy every opponent had an excuse for. I was the warrior … the warrior/god that was loved by all women and feared by all men. I loved watching the wrestling matches. I watched him win three state championships and I won them right along with him. We were the only guys ever to do that in the history of the whole state. He was the best there ever was, but he didn’t care about it like he did football. The crowds were smaller and the press clippings were thinner than they were in football, and besides, the program had been dropped at the university two years ago because it didn’t make any money.

I watched Nick accelerate from the line, but the guy next to him pulled away at fifteen yards. Nick ran his guts out, but he finished two yards behind.

11
Current Events

After practice I went home and found a spot on the floor to watch the news and wait for the dinner bell. Like everything else in the house the TV room had a caste system, and the furniture defined it.

There was a worn out couch in the southwest corner beneath a big double hung window. It was brown and white, with belted seams that separated the cloth-upholstered cushions. Every one of the belts was broken, and the fabric was threadbare with little bits of white stuffing sticking out through clusters of tiny holes. It was the sophomore couch and it was at least ten years old, and only a hand-me-down away from the junk heap.

In the opposite corner was the sophomore-couch-replacement-in-waiting, otherwise known as the junior couch. It was in only slightly better condition than the sophomore couch, covered with faded brown nagahyde that was scuffed raw on the armrests. It didn’t have any holes in it, but it sagged in the middle, the result of a center support that fractured when John Pursell sat in it last spring.

The two senior chairs rested between the couches. One of them was the same style as the sophomore couch, and the other looked like a miniature version of the junior couch. The chairs and couches were always purchased together. The chair went to the seniors, and the couch to the juniors. The sophomores got what was left over.

I was on the floor with my pledge brothers because we didn’t have any furniture. We were fated to spend our first year of college in a jumbled mess on the rug. A senior could bump a
junior from his couch, a junior could bump a sophomore, but once the couches and chairs were filled up, the rest of the guys ended up on the old tattered shag carpet with the frogs.

I lay with my head resting on the back of Trapper’s thigh. He was a pledge from the eastern part of the state. He had thick eyebrows that extended across the bridge of his nose from one side of his forehead to the other like a big black caterpillar. The Faceman had picked up on his monobrow and the fact that he wore only flannel shirts and christened him “Trapper.” The name stuck like glue and Trapper seemed almost proud of it. I liked him, but I had reservations about having my nose so close to his asshole. I was completely at his mercy, but unfortunately there was no other way I could prop my head up to watch the TV. We frogs had to take care of each other, and I hoped Trapper would remember that.

"Muhammad Ali knocked out Floyd Patterson in the seventh round to retain his heavyweight crown at Madison Square Garden last night." Walter Cronkite said. He was glaring at us from inside the television. His mustache bounced up and down with each word he spoke. Dudley stirred on the sophomore couch.

"I think he should call himself Muhammad Dud-lee," he said.

"What did you say?" The Faceman asked from the junior couch.

Crasher sat on the sophomore couch too. He turned his thick glasses toward Dudley and jabbed a bony elbow into his ribs.

"Shut up, shit lips!" he said.

Cronkite continued

"Israeli jets continued to attack guerrilla bases in Lebanon and Syria in retaliation for the bloody massacre of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics. Israeli sources claim to have killed scores of guerrillas at multiple bases, while Arab sources say thirty people were killed."

"I wonder when all of this is gonna stop," The Faceman said, as he combed his hair on the junior couch. He patted the top of his head a few times and then slipped the comb into his hip pocket.

"What do you think?" Interrupted Booby. He was on the junior couch right next to The Faceman. "Was it thirty? Or was it scores?"

"Margaret says it’s never gonna stop,"

This statement came from a junior sitting on the other side of The Faceman. He was known as Big Wally and he had two of the biggest and whitest front teeth I’d ever seen. His face looked fixed in a permanent grin, which The Faceman constantly referred to as a shit-eating grin. None of us knew if Big Wally just a happy-go-lucky guy who smiled all the time, or if he was
simply incapable of fitting his teeth into his mouth. The origin of his name, Big Wally, was as obscure as the source of his grin. His real name was John Rothman. He was happy to have the floor because nobody ever seemed to give a shit what Big Wally thought or said. He sat up straight on the couch now, and I could almost see his big teeth reflecting off of Crasher’s glasses on the opposite side of the room.

“We were playing poker last night,” Big Wally continued, “and Margaret said they’re just gonna keep killing each other until everybody’s dead.”

“How much did she take you for?” Moose asked. He was an upper classman sitting in one of the senior chairs. He always held a Styrofoam cup that was half filled with dark brown tobacco juice. He spit into the cup after asking the question.

“Four fifty,” Big Wally answered. He smiled with his shit-eating grin. The Faceman shook his head and responded:

“Jesus Wally! When are you ever gonna learn.”

Cronkite continued.

“Seven men were indicted today on charges of conspiring to break into the Democratic National Headquarters at the Watergate Complex three months ago. Among the men indicted were two White House aides, E. Howard Hunt, and G. Gordon Liddy.”

“I’ll bet Nixon knew,” Poopsie said. He was a sophomore pre-med who sat next to Dudley. "I'll bet the son-of-a-bitch knew about the whole thing. He's just hunkered down right now, hoping it will all blow over."

Ray Morris perked up right next to Poopsie. "Baretta could catch him," he said. "Baretta always gets his man."

“What?” Mitchell asked. He was right behind me. He had his head propped up on the heel of his hand. “What the hell are you talking about Morris?”

Booby answered for everybody who knew anything about Morris. He sat on the junior couch and twisted the end of his mustache as he spoke.

"Morris wants to be Baretta. He thinks he is Baretta," Booby said, as he looked across the room at Morris and continued. “This stuff about Baretta has got me worried Morris. You can’t be Baretta. You don’t even look like Baretta. You’re short like he is, but you don’t have any muscles and you don’t even have a parrot. I'll bet Baretta didn't go to college either. Did you ever think of that? Do you think Baretta went to college like you?”

"I'm sure he could have gone to college if he wanted to," Morris responded, as he leaned back in the couch and folded his arms across his chest.
“Your seriously disturbed,” Booby concluded.

Crasher pushed his thick glasses up on his nose with his index finger and then jabbed Morris in the ribs with his elbow. Morris responded with a right cross that landed with a whack on Crasher’s thin shoulder.

“Baretta could catch the president!” Morris said. “Baretta always gets his man.”

The phone rang and I rolled over and looked at Mitchell and he looked at Trapper who looked at me. Mitchell caved in first, and got up to answer it. We turned our attention back to the TV.

“The U.S. halted a three million dollar loan to Uganda today after Ugandan president Idi Amin publicly praised Hitler. Government sources could not be reached for comment.” Cronkite said.

Moose almost choked on his tobacco juice. “Jesus! Where do they get these African dictators?”

“The large father just needs some public relations help.” Dudley said.

“What did you say Dudley?” The Faceman asked, “Jesus! Why don’t you talk a little louder? I can never hear what you say. Nobody can hear you.” He took another swipe at his hair with his comb.

“Eat my shorts Faceman.”

“What did you say?” The Faceman asked. “Shit! I wish you’d talk louder.”

I heard the back door slam, and a moment later I saw Nick amble down the hallway. He carried a book bag over his shoulder. His hair was wet and his shirttail dangled out over his hips. He dropped the bag in the hallway and entered the room. He paid no attention to the sophomore couch, choosing instead to jump on top of me. He slipped a cross-face on me, and then pushed my right elbow out from underneath me. I fought back just like I always had.

“How was school today?” he asked, as he pulled my right arm across my body.

“It was okay,” I gasped, as my gut got squished down into my elbow.

I turned my head to the right and pushed my body to the left, trying to keep from being turned over. Mitchell stuck his head into the room.

“Who’s Dave Johnson?” he asked.

Booby got up from the couch.

“I thought you’re name was Booby?” Mitchell said.

“You’ve got to learn the names,” Booby answered.
“But I thought your name was Booby?” Mitchell said again, as he stepped over Nick and me and found an open patch of carpet.

“Who’s Dave Johnson?” Trapper asked. He’d been watching the news and just noticed Mitchell.

“Dave Johnson is Booby,” Mitchell said.

“I can barely remember Booby,” Trapper responded.

“Did you know all of the answers in your chemistry class?” Nick continued, as he planted his right hand between my knees, and levered his left hand toward his right. "I've been bragging about how smart you are in school. Don't let me down."

“I didn't know the answers when I went to class,” I said. I was extending my right leg, trying to break the cradle. "But I knew them when I came out."

I broke free of his grasp but only because he wanted me to. “How about you?” I asked. “How was class? How was practice?” I reached back with my right hand and grabbed his right leg. I executed the switch perfectly and reversed positions.

"Bobby Fischer returned home from Iceland today after defeating Boris Spassky for the world championship of chess," Cronkite said.

"Any of you frogs know how to play chess?” Big Wally asked. "I'll kick your ass in chess. I really will!” He smiled with his big shit-eating grin and The Faceman responded.

"Bullshit Wally! You're not squat for a chess player."

Nick ducked a cross-face from me. "Class was O.K.,” he said. “And so was practice ... I guess."

He hooked my right elbow in his, and rolled me to his right side. I couldn’t do anything to stop it and I came over the top of him. I accidentally kicked Poopsie in the leg.

"Watch it you guys!” he said.

"The U.S. ended its inquiry into the Mylai massacre this week," Cronkite said.

"Eat my shorts Poopsie!” Nick said. He flipped Poopsie the bird as he said it, and Poopsie raised his right leg and farted in response. Crasher and Dudley moved to the end of the couch. They leaned their heads as far away from Poopsie as they could.

"What would Baretta do in a situation like this?” Morris asked.

"I met a girl in my economics class,” Nick continued, as he levered me over.

I struggled to keep from going on my back, but I couldn't stop the momentum. "What's her name?” I asked, as I tried to keep at least one shoulder off the ground. I was starting to sweat, and I could feel the bite of a rug burn on my right elbow.
"I don't know," Nick said, as he let me wiggle free. "I didn't ask her."
I slipped beneath his arm, and tried a half nelson. "What did you talk about if you didn't even ask her name?"
My words were coming between gasps as I tried to push his big shoulders over. He resisted only slightly, and I slowly turned him over.
"I didn't really talk to her ... you see."
I pushed the half nelson deeper around his thick neck.
"You need to talk to girls before they'll go out with you. This isn't like high school you know." I couldn't get his left shoulder to touch the floor. I put more of my weight on the top of it.
"Oh! So now you're the expert on girls?"
"I'm not an expert, but I'm not an idiot either." I bounced up and down on top of his left shoulder. It didn't budge. "She probably doesn't know who you are. She's likely never even heard of you before. This isn't like it was in high school." The shoulder was getting closer to the floor.
"You have to talk to her."
"Okay," he said. "I'll talk to her. I'll talk to her the next time I see her."
I watched his shoulder slowly come down toward the floor. We both knew it was a charade. He could squash me like a bug if he wanted to ... but he never did. I was half Tarzan and half Kazaam! I'd spent my whole life wrestling with Nick on the rug or on the lawn, and he always let me win ... well ... most of the time anyway. He'd let me struggle until I finally got his shoulder down and then the game would be over. It had been like that in grade school and middle school and even in high school when he was kicking the shit out of everybody else in the whole state. Everybody except me. I'd always managed to beat his ass, well ... most of the time anyway.
"I think she's nice," he said as he let his shoulder come down a little farther. "Even though I haven't talked to her yet, I just have a feeling she's nice." He dropped his left shoulder to the floor.
"A pin!!" I shouted.
I got to my knees and flexed my muscles. He rolled over and wiped a loose piece of brown shag carpet from the side of his face.
"You're as strong as the Hulk and as fast as the Goddamned Flash!" he said.
The dinner bell rang and the sophomore couch emptied first. We ducked as the tennis shoes flew over our heads. We got up with the rest of the frogs after the stampede had slowed down, and followed the crowd toward the dining room.
It felt good to be there. After a year at home without him, it felt good just to see him every single day and talk to him and eat dinner with him … and to kick his ass again just like I used to. Walter Cronkite spoke to an empty room behind us.

“And that’s the way it is,” he said. “On Monday, September eighteenth, nineteen seventy two.”

12
Saturday

It was Saturday morning and the sleeping porch was quiet except for Big Wally’s snoring. As the sun warmed my blankets I rolled over and took a look at the long row of bunk beds extending down the narrow room. I took a moment to enjoy the comfort I felt. After one week of school I’d managed to learn the names of every one of the members. I was starting to understand how the house worked, and I liked it.

The whole thing was possible because of our similar ages and interests. It gave us a structure that helped direct us. The members who didn’t want to live within the structure could leave if they wanted to, or they could be banished if they didn’t. But for most of us, it helped us at a time when we really needed it.

The house gave us our meals and a warm place to sleep, but more than that it gave us companionship and solidarity too. I was starting to understand why the army drafted eighteen-year-old kids. We needed to be with guys our own age so we could band together and march toward adulthood. We found comfort in it. Drafting a thirty-year-old private, or pledging a thirty-year-old frog wouldn’t work. They’d be past the fraternal stage and have no use for the structure. They’d find it too confining. But for us … for the eighteen-year-olds … the structure was fine. We welcomed it.

I rolled out of my bed and walked down the stairs through the old section door. I pulled a T-shirt and a pair of gym shorts from a pile of clothes on the floor in my room. I checked the collar and waistband to make sure they were mine, and then sniffed them a couple of times before pulling them on just to make sure I hadn’t mixed up the pile of clean clothes with the dirty ones. I headed down another flight of stairs to the kitchen and found a row of cereal boxes waiting for me on the dining room table. Margaret didn’t work on weekends, so I chose the corn flakes and poured myself a glass of juice. I sat next to Nick and Crasher. They were engaged in what looked like a pretty serious conversation.
"Nine o'clock is too early," Crasher said. "I say we wait until at least eleven."
"Too early for what?" I asked, but neither of them noticed me.
"Eleven! No way!" Nick said. "They'll be getting ready for lunch by then. We'll need to be ready at nine."
"It won't be warm enough at nine. It's got to be warm enough."
"Warm enough for what?" Milk dribbled from my chin as I spoke. I wiped it with the back of my hand. They both still ignored me.
"How about ten?" Nick asked. "Ten would be a good compromise."
I ate another spoonful of corn flakes and listened to the conversation as I studied the features of Nick and Crasher. They were completely different in almost every way.
"Ten o'clock then," Crasher said. He leaned back in his chair and drummed his fingers on the table top.
Crasher was six foot three and beanpole thin. His arms and legs sprung out from a long lean body that looked like it could fold in half without breaking. Every joint seemed to form a sharp angle. Nick, on the other hand, was five foot eleven and thick everywhere. His body looked almost unmovable next to Crasher's. Crasher had long, reddish-blond hair that was thinning out on the top. Nick's hair was short, thick, and dark. Crasher's eyes were pale green, and they hid behind thick round glasses. Nick's eyes were sharp and dark and intense.
"How many?" Crasher asked.
"How many what?" I asked.
Nick looked down into his coffee. "I say we need at least ten, maybe more."
"Ten sounds good, We'll need that many just to get the buckets up on top. How about you Brooks ... are you in?" Crasher looked across the table at me for the first time.
I looked back with my spoonful of corn flakes halfway to my mouth.
"He's in," Nick said. "It shouldn't take long to round up the other guys."
"Okay then, it's settled," Crasher said as he and Nick stood up. "We'll meet in the alley at ten."
"Be there, you won't regret it," Nick said to me.
"Okay," I said. "Whatever you say."
I wondered what I was getting into. It didn't bother me that I didn't know the particulars. It had always been like that when it came to Nick. Whatever he said, I did. I trusted him. I'd spent my whole life trusting Nick, and I didn't see any reason to stop now just because I didn't know
what was going to happen. If he wanted me in the alley at ten, I'd be there, no question's asked. It was part of that fraternal thing.

I finished my breakfast and read the paper before walking out the back door of the house at nine fifty five. A small group of guys were huddled around the faucet by the back window of the kitchen. Big plastic buckets surrounded them. Mitchell was busy filling each one with cool clear water, while Big Wally and Booby waited in line. Moose stood close by and supervised the action, his ever-present half-filled cup of tobacco juice in his hand. I got in line with the rest of the guys.

"What about balloons?" Mitchell said. "Shouldn't we have balloons?"

Moose took a dip of tobacco from his circular tin, and placed it in his lower lip. "Balloons are for pussies Mitchell," he said. "The best weapons are buckets and hoses." He looked at Booby. "Do we have enough hose to reach to the far side doorway?"

"The Faceman is checking that out," Booby said, as he lifted a bucket and disappeared around the corner of the house.

"Positioning the hoses is the key," Moose continued. He was in a lecture mode now. He paced back and forth in the alley as he schooled us on the merits of hoses. He spat dark brown saliva onto the asphalt as he walked. "You've got to be ready with the hoses," he finally concluded.

I watched my bucket fill up with cold water as Moose talked about the pros and cons of buckets vs. hoses. I knew one thing. My bucket was big, five gallons at least, and I needed both hands to lift it up and stagger around the corner of the house without spilling the whole thing. I looked up to find Nick crouched on the fire escape of the Kappa Pi Beta house. He reached down for the bucket and pulled it up with one hand like it was nothing.

"Tell those guys we need another five buckets," He whispered.

"Okay Nick."

I whispered too, although I had no idea why. I trotted back behind the house and got in line with Booby.

"Thank God for a new group of freshmen every year," he said. "Otherwise they'd get wise to this and it would never work." He picked up his bucket and disappeared.

The Faceman came around the opposite corner of the house. "We've got the front hose hooked up," he said. "It reaches all the way across the yard to the front door."
Moose smiled and gave him a thumb’s up. "Okay!" he said. "Brooks and Big Wally will take the front door. Booby and I will take the back. Mitchell and The Faceman will go up on top with Nick and Crasher. Be ready with the hoses when you hear them scream."

I followed The Faceman and Mitchell back to the fire escape. We handed our buckets to Nick, and he placed them on top of the roof. He reached down and grabbed Mitchell and then The Faceman by the arm. He pulled them up to the fire escape and then pushed them up on top of the roof. He stuck his hand out toward me.

"I’m supposed to go to the front door," I whispered.

“You should come up here first,” he said.

I saw Crasher’s head pop over the edge of the roof. His face was outlined by a clear blue sky and his eyes squinted from behind his thick glasses in a look of pure delight. I reached up and took Nick’s arm without a moment’s hesitation. He lifted me up like an elevator to the flat-topped, tar-covered roof. He put his finger to his lips and we slowly crept toward the buckets that were now in a row beside a small ledge that protected the rain gutters on the south side of the Kappa Pi Beta house. He pointed over the edge.

“Right down there," He whispered. "Have a look, but keep it quiet."

I took a spot next to Mitchell and slowly moved my head over the edge and looked down. I was treated to the site of the women of Kappa Pi Beta sorority sun bathing on the patio below me.

My mouth fell open at the site of them. They were covered with oil ... every one of them, and their skin looked slick and firm as it baked on the patio. The combination of skin and oil and sunlight dazzled me. None of us moved. We all looked in silence ... not speaking ... barely breathing.

They lay in two almost identical rows. Each one looked slightly different … each one perfect in it’s own way. I could feel my eyes move from left to right as if reading a book. I admired each one in turn.

Some of the women of Kappa Pi Beta lay face down. Their bikini bottoms complemented each symmetrically round bottom, and each shade of brown skin looked slightly different next to the yellows and greens and reds of their bathing suits. Half the girls had their top strap untied. Their breasts were compressed against the ground and they pushed out in soft round curves under their arms that made small milky white crescents that contrasted with the golden tan on their shoulders.
Some of the women of Kappa Pi Beta lay on their backs, and they were just as tantalizing. Their bikini bottoms formed skimpy triangles that tapered out to a string on each hip ... just a small piece of cloth tied in place with a couple of strings. They were very small string’s ... very fragile string’s ... that separated us from what we spent most of our time thinking about.

We looked down as if spellbound. We stared at the site as if drinking it up in great big gulps. I saw Mitchell's hands tremble and his Adam’s apple bob up and down as he held onto the edge of the roof and looked down.

"Jesus," he whispered. "Oh sweet Jesus!"

"Quiet!" Crasher hissed.

"Looking at this ... it’s almost too much," Mitchell said, as much to himself as the rest of us.

"Jesus! Keep it down!" Crasher insisted. But he was smiling. We were all smiling and trying to stifle our own giddiness as we listened to Mitchell and looked down at the girls.

"Which one?" The Faceman asked.

“What?”

"Which one would you choose?"

We all looked back down at the patio again, each one of us answering the question in our own mind.

"I couldn't choose," Mitchell said finally as we listened and looked. "Nobody could choose just one. I'd want to be with all of them." He paused and licked his lips. "I'd like to be with all of them at once … down there … with lot's of suntan oil."

We all struggled to contain ourselves as we pulled Mitchell back from the edge.

"Brooks!" Nick said. "You go down to the front door with Big Wally. Keep your eye on us. You'll know what to do."

"Whatever you say Nick."

I could feel my heart pounding as I climbed down the fire escape and dropped to the sidewalk. I crept around the side of the house and wondered what I was supposed to do when I found Big Wally. It didn’t matter. From what I’d seen on the patio, I knew I wanted to be a part of it. Nick was right. I didn’t regret being there, as a matter of fact, I couldn’t think of anyplace I’d rather be.

I found Big Wally by the corner of the Kappa Pi Beta house between the patio and the front door. Cold water ran steadily out the end of a long green hose. He handed it to me, his two front teeth looking bigger and whiter than ever.
"You take care of the hose," he whispered. "I'll grab a few of the girls when they run by. You can hose us down!"

I took the hose.

"Hey Wally?"

"What?"

"How come you get to grab the girls?"

"It's my job. Your job is to run the hose."

"I think I'd rather have your job," I said. "I think you should run the hose."

"Maybe when you're a sophomore you can grab the girls. This year you're stuck holding the hose," he answered.

I looked up and saw Nick, Dudley, Mitchell, and The Faceman slowly approach the edge of the roof. Each one carried a five-gallon bucket. They peered over the edge and paused for just a moment to admire the view again before pouring the cold water all at once over the edge. It fell silently through the air, suspended for an instant in time, before it crashed on top of the patio.

The women of Kappa Pi Beta exploded in sound and color and movement. They screamed and bolted upright, some of them grabbing their bikini tops in time, others reacting just a fraction of a second too late. They looked up to see Dudley and Nick dumping a second bucket on top of them, and a stampede ensued. Half of the girls ran toward the front door, the other half took the longer route behind the house to the back door.

I held on tight to my hose as the first wave of girls rounded the corner. When they got within range I opened fire. Big Wally grabbed the first girl he saw, and I hosed them both down. She kicked him in the shin and I heard him scream in pain. He let her go and grabbed the front of his leg, hopping up and down on one foot while he looked for another girl. Ten or twelve others came around the corner all at once, and I saw only a blur of tanned flesh and bright colored cloth. I sprayed wildly in every direction. My heart raced. I'd never been so close to so many beautiful girls wearing so few clothes in my life.

I wasn't sure what happened next. I saw a slender girl with lots of red hair that streamed out behind her head as she ran. She had pale skin and white teeth and she ran straight toward me. She kept her head up, and planted her forehead right in the center of my chest before I could do anything about it. I didn't even manage to get the hose pointed in her direction.

Things went blank for a second, and the next thing I knew I was on the ground. The redhead had yanked the hose out of my hands, and I was under a waterfall. I tried to get up, but I got knocked down again. I rolled to my back, and looked up to see myself mounted by a woman.
... a wild-eyed, sun-burned, tornado of a woman in a green bikini. I could feel her strong thighs on each side of my hips, and through the cascade of water I could see her dark red hair. It stuck out in Medusa-like wisps at all angles from her head. Her face was lean and angular, and it had sparse freckles with bright white teeth. It was an unforgettable face. It was a fresh and wild face, the likes of which I’d never seen.

The freckle-faced, red-haired, woman looked down at me and laughed as she drenched me with the hose. She screamed like a wild animal.

"Yeeewwww Haaaaaa!!!"

The water poured down my throat and I coughed and sputtered and struggled to get up, but I couldn’t escape her. She stuck her fist in the center of my chest and shoved me back to the ground. I felt the power in her hand and realized that my dreams had finally come true. I was mounted and immobilized by the woman of my childhood dreams. I was trapped between the cable-like thighs of Sheetah the jungle woman. I looked up through the water at red and pink and white and green … at cloth and flesh and hair and water … all of it mixed together. This wasn’t just any woman. It was Sheetah for sure … after all these years I’d finally found her.

I’d spent many a night alone in my room as a kid with my comic books and a hard-on dreaming about Sheetah, and now she was right here … right on top of me. She didn’t know it, but I had her right where I wanted her. She was wild and wiry and tough enough to kill the cheetah whose spots were on that skimpy outfit she always wore in the comic books. I’d looked at page after page of those beautiful legs beneath the hem of her short skirt and I’d wondered what it would be like to be trapped between them … to be at her mercy. Sheeee-taaah! Thank God I finally found you! College was even better than I’d imagined.

I struggled for control of the hose, but she was too strong … so goddamned strong. Just like I’d always imagined her. I saw Big Wally holding a freshman pledge who fought like a tigress. He looked over his shoulder at a dozen girls who descended upon him with garden hoses and pots and pans filled with water. He let the girl go, but not soon enough to avoid getting drenched. He fell down on the lawn and crawled toward me. Two girls jumped on him and held him while a third girl in a red bikini soaked him with a water-filled wastebasket.

I pulled myself closer to Sheetah. I could see Nick watching the water fight from the roof.  He held his stomach and laughed so hard I thought he’d fall off. The hose between Sheetah and me squirted water in every direction. I tried again to get up, but her legs remained locked around my waist and we both fell back to the grass. She dropped the hose and it writhed around
between us like a long skinny snake. Nick was laughing uncontrollably now. He doubled over and put his hands on his knees

"Come on Brooks!" He shouted. "I know you can take her!" He doubled over in laughter again … the son-of-a-bitch.

“Get down here!” I shouted, although I had no idea if he could hear me or not. Sheetah grabbed on to the hose so I grabbed both of her wrists. Her legs came loose from my waist for an instant and every part of her body seemed to move at once as she fought for the hose. She felt like a great big electric cable. Her face was about three inches from mine, and I wanted to kiss her. For an instant, I wondered if she wouldn’t mind it. I reached from her wrist to the end of the hose.

“No you don’t!” she said, as her hand followed mine and covered the end of the nozzle. Water squirted everywhere and she screamed “Yeeee Haaaaaa!”

Big Wally was back on his feet now, and he had a hose. Everybody was screaming. He sprayed water everywhere in big circles like a human sprinkler, his teeth gleaming in the sun. I rolled over and over on the lawn with Sheetah, the squirting hose trapped between her breasts and my pounding heart. I felt her lean hard body pushing up against mine each time I rolled over, and I could feel my dick getting hard too. It got bigger and harder until I knew she had to feel it too, trapped between the two of us. She didn’t seem to mind it and I couldn’t seem to stop it. So I just rolled over and over on the ground with Sheetah … loving every moment of it, grabbing for the hose and maybe a little something else if I got lucky, until a big cascade of icy-cold water came crashing down over the top of both of us. It was so cold that for an instant I forgot about my hard-on and I forgot to hang on to Sheetah, and then she was gone. I sat up and saw her backing away from me. Her cheeks were flushed and her chest heaved beneath the triangles of cloth that covered her breasts. Her belly was flat and hard, and her legs looked slim and powerful at the same time. Her eyes crinkled when she smiled at me.

“I’ll remember you,” she said. “I’ll get even for this.”

“You know where to find me,” I gasped. “I’ll be waiting for you.”

She turned around and bounded away like an antelope. The muscles in her butt and thighs and calves flexed and relaxed with each stride. For a moment I thought her bathing suit was made from a cheetah’s skin …... Sheeeeee-taaahhhh!!!

I rolled over on the grass and looked at the carnage on the front lawn. Garden hoses ran back and forth like spider webs amongst a bunch of Margaret’s pots and pans that had been
pilfered from the kitchen. Nick stood next to me holding one of the five-gallon buckets. It had been he who rescued me from the iron grasp of Sheetah, that son-of-a-bitch

“What are you doing?” I asked.
“You looked like you could use some help.”
“I had the situation under control.”
“Sure Brooks.”
He dropped the empty bucket at my feet.
“You’d better watch out for Cowgirl,” he said. “She’s tougher than half the guys in the house.”

“Who’s Cowgirl?”
“The girl who just kicked your ass.”
“She’s not Sheetah?”
“What the hell are you talking about?”
“Sheetah! You remember her! It was her for sure!”
“Snap out of it Brooks!” he said. “Your little redheaded friend is called Cowgirl. Everybody knows Cowgirl. You should know better than to pick a fight with ….”

His voice trailed off and I followed his glance toward the sidewalk. There was a girl standing there. She wore faded blue shorts and a white cotton sleeveless shirt. She had dark almond shaped eyes and dark hair that was pulled back behind her head and held there with a leather strip and a polished brown wooden stick that stuck through it. Her clothes were simple, but the rest of her was far from that. She was extraordinary in every way. She had legs that were exceptionally long and beautiful and skin that wasn’t quite white and wasn’t quite brown. It was the color of Trapper’s morning coffee … one-third coffee and two-thirds cream. She was more than beautiful … she was the most extraordinary girl I’d ever seen.

Nick didn’t say a word. He just stood there on the lawn in his gym trunks with his shirt off and his muscles sticking out all over the place and he couldn’t muster up anything to say. That was unusual for him. Whenever he’d been around a girl that looked like this one did, he’d always known the right thing to say.

“I didn’t see you in class yesterday,” she said. Her voice was a little deeper than I thought it would be. Nick looked down at his feet as he answered.

“I had some things I needed to do … I should have told you on Thursday.”
“I have the notes if you’d like to copy them.”
Nick looked at me and blushed.
“That would be good I guess … no … I mean … I’d really appreciate it. It would be great of you to do that … if I can get them from you? Would today be okay?”

She smiled back. It was an unusual smile … a close-mouthed smile that left me wanting more.

“I’m going to the library right now,” she said. “Do you want to come along?”

Nick looked down at his near-naked self and then he looked at me as if to ask for advise. I looked back at her. She was nice to look at.

“Uhmmmm … okay,” he said. “Just give me a few minutes to change.”

He looked back at me and shrugged his shoulders before turning away and dashing into the house. She and I were left alone to look at each other and wonder. That was okay with me. She was beautiful … she was the most beautiful girl I’d ever seen. She spoke before I did.

“Are you Brooks?”

“How did you know that?” I asked. The sound of her voice made my heart skip a beat.

“He’s told me about you.”

My heart almost stopped.

“Are you in his economics class?” I asked.

“How did you know that?” She asked back.

“He told me about you too.”

My answer seemed to please her and she opened her mouth for just a second and smiled. I noticed her front tooth right away. The left one was crowded by the right one, and it angled inward just the slightest little bit. It was her only flaw; at least the only one I could see. But it wasn’t really a flaw. It made her look even better in a way, even more beautiful. She closed her mouth almost immediately.

“How do you like school so far?” she asked.

She looked as if she were interested in my answer. Most of the people who ask that question don’t really care what you said. My parent’s friends always ask that question and then interrupt me before I can finish answering it. But she cared. I could tell she cared by the look in her eyes.

“I’m still getting used to it I guess, but so far I like it. I like it just fine.”

“I can’t believe I’m finally here,” she said, as she hugged the books that were cradled in her arms.

“What house do you live in?” I asked. She seemed to hesitate for just a moment before she answered me.
“I live with my aunt,” she said. “She works at the school and she’s letting me stay with her.”

“Oh,” I said. I didn’t know if I’d put my foot in my mouth or not. I didn’t want to lose the conversation. I wanted to keep her attention for as long as I could. She looked behind me at the mess in the yard.

“Just a water fight,” I said, as I nodded toward the Kappa Pi Beta house. “They started it.”

“I’m sure … you look completely innocent.”

We heard the front door open and turned to see Nick bound down the front steps of the porch three at a time. He stopped when he reached the sidewalk and tucked his T-shirt into his gym trunks.

“I’m ready!” he said

He stepped up beside her and waited for a moment as if unsure what to do next.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

Nick flushed red. “Sorry,” he said. He looked from me to her and then back to me. “Leslie, this is Brooks … and Brooks this is Leslie.”

“Nice to meet you Brooks,” she said. She smiled with her peculiar closed-mouth grin and I felt my heart race again.

“It’s my pleasure,” I said. “You two have a good time at the library.”

I watched them walk away and was struck by how strange it all seemed. I’d known Nick my whole life and I’d never seen him so tongue-tied around a good-looking girl. I’d never seen him spend a Saturday afternoon at the library either. But then again, she was no ordinary good-looking girl. She was a girl any guy would spend the rest of his life imprisoned in a library just so he could get close to her. She was the most extraordinary girl I’d ever seen.

13
Zeke’s Stereo

Zeke had the best stereo in the house. He had a Gerard turntable that was attached to a Marantz amplifier that drove the sound through a pair of high-end Advent speakers. The sound generated by the diamond-tipped needle was magnified with one hundred twenty watts per channel in the amplifier, before it blasted out through the big speakers that sat on top of the dresser in the room that Zeke shared with Trapper. At one-third volume the room was so filled with sound you could barely hear a person shout right next to you. At two-thirds volume
conversation was impossible even at the end of the hallway. Everything on the whole floor shook when Zeke turned the stereo up. He was proud of it, and rightfully so.

On the weekdays in the evening Zeke's stereo was banished, so at night he was forced to listen to his music through his headphones. Sometimes I'd walk by his room and he'd be hunched over his desk with his headphones on and his head would be bobbing up and down over the top of his textbooks. The only way you could get his attention was to walk right up next to him and lift the headphones off of his head. He didn't mind using the headphones. They sounded almost as good as the speakers did.

Zeke's room was a popular place in the afternoon. There was no ban on the stereo during the day, so right after lunch the guys would migrate to his room for some good loud music. They'd stand shoulder to shoulder in there and play air guitar and gyrate around like a bunch of spastics with their left hand contorted into a cord on the neck of their imaginary guitars. They'd strum furiously with their right hand while they bounced into each other and sang the lyrics to one of the latest hot albums. They could sing as loud as they wanted to because no one could hear anything but the stereo in Zeke's room. The music from the three-foot speakers smothered every other sound.

I'd just finished lunch and was headed back to my room when I heard the Doobie Brothers booming out of Zeke's room. They were singing China Road and I couldn't help but follow their voices straight to the source. When I got there I saw Crasher through the open door. His mouth moved and he waved at me with his right hand, but of course I couldn't understand what he said because the Doobies were rocking along at about one-third volume, maybe even half, and nobody could hear anybody else in that room. So I held my hand cupped up to my ear and shook my head. He stuck his head out into the hallway and shouted right into my face.

"Come on in!"

Even then I could barely make out the words.

"There's room in here for another air guitar!" he shouted.

I walked through the door and found Zeke, Trapper, Crasher, Big Wally, and Booby stuffed into the tiny space playing air guitar like crazy and screaming at the top of their lungs. Being so close to the source of the music set me into motion too, and I automatically picked up my air guitar and joined them. I could feel the air waves from the speakers blast into my chest and I couldn't hear anything except the voices of the Doobie Brothers. I sang as loud as I could. We were half way through the number when Crasher leaned over and tapped me on the shoulder.
He had the headphones in his hands and he wanted me to wear them. I nodded my head and he lowered them onto my ears. They were great big ones, with rolls of foam rubber around the outside that sealed the music inside. I’d always wondered what they sounded like when I’d seen Zeke wearing them. The ones I’d used at home were cheap ones that made the music sound like it came from the bottom of a tin can, but these were first class. They sounded great. Crasher was right next to me and he leaned his head back until his thick glasses pointed straight up at the ceiling. He strummed his air guitar furiously and we all sang along with the Doobies.

I sang without inhibition. The headphones locked the music inside my head and they didn’t let anything else in or out. I wondered if everything I really cared about was inside those headphones. I imagined I was one of the Doobies. I belted out the words and moved my left hand up and down the neck of my air guitar. I’d always wanted to be a singer. The closest I’d ever gotten was a men’s chorus in high school. We didn’t sing any of the Doobie Brother’s songs. We sang a bunch of stuff our parents liked to listen to when they went out at night to watch a play, but I still liked it. I’d even practiced singing when I was alone in the shower and sometimes in the soundproof rooms right next to the concert hall at school. But I’d never had the guts to sing by myself in public. I didn’t think I was good enough. I’d always wanted to, but I just didn’t have the guts to do it.

Of course none of that mattered now, not while I was in Zeke’s room. Everybody was a star in Zeke’s room. Now that there were one hundred twenty watts ripping through each speaker, we could sing as loud as we wanted to, and nobody would ever give a shit or know the difference.

At the end of the first chorus I opened my eyes and the room was motionless. The others had dropped their air guitars and stopped singing. They stood with their arms at their sides and stared at me as if I was the only fish in a small bowl. Trapper’s mouth hung open a little bit and I could see Crasher speaking to me, but of course I couldn’t hear a word he said. I stopped playing my air guitar and lifted the headphones off my head and was startled to find that the room was completely silent except for the now small-sounding notes that came out from the headphone speakers.

“What happened?” I asked Booby, who was right next to Crasher and twirling his mustache like mad.

“Just a little gag,” he said. “We didn’t know you could sing like that.” He had abandoned his air guitar too.

“Where’d you learn to sing like that anyway?” Trapper asked.
“Like what?” I asked back.

“Quiet!”

It was Zeke. He was standing by the doorway looking down the hall. He held his hand up toward us like a cop stopping traffic.

“Here comes Mitchell!” he said. “Hit the speakers!”

Crasher reached in front of me and pushed a button on the amplifier and the room started to shake again as the speakers came to life and the Doobies filled the place with music again. Crasher leaned toward my right ear.

“Just play along,” he shouted. “You’ll see how it works.”

Everybody in the room started playing air guitar again and I joined them, gyrating and contorting myself into every position a self-respecting rock star might assume. Zeke stepped out into the hall and screamed at Mitchell, who stopped right in front of the door.

“Come on in!” he said. “There’s room in here for another air guitar.”

Mitchell nodded his head and walked right in. He picked up his air guitar and joined us without a moment’s hesitation. He was really into it, and I admired his style as he spun around on his right foot and ferociously strummed with his right hand. We were all joining the chorus of “Listen to the Music,” screaming at the top of our lungs, when Crasher leaned over toward Mitchell and tapped him on the shoulder. He had the headphones in his hands and he showed them to Mitchell who nodded his head as Crasher slipped them over his ears. We finished the chorus and started the next verse and Mitchell did one of his spin moves and screamed at the opposite wall just as Crasher hit the button. The room became as silent as a tomb except for the small sounds escaping from the foam around the headphones on Mitchell’s head, and of course Mitchell’s singing.

Like all of us Mitchell sang with wild abandon, screaming out the words he knew and faking the one’s he didn’t. His voice was awful. The pitch was unrecognizable and the rhythm was pure chaos, but Mitchell didn’t care because nobody could hear him, at least that’s what he thought. All of us had stopped singing the second the speakers were turned off, and that left Mitchell doing a solo, one of the worst in the history of mankind.

“Keep playing your air guitar and just fake the words,” Crasher said to me. “Let’s see how long we can keep him going.”

All of us surrounded Mitchell. We gyrated and strummed and pantomimed the words as Mitchell made the worst racket any of us had ever heard. It was hard to keep a straight face. Zeke checked his watch.
“One minute!” he said, and Mitchell showed no signs of letting up.

“What’s the record?” I asked, as I tried a kick-move I’d seen Rod Stewart do on TV.

“Trapper went for two and a half minutes,” Crasher said.

Booby gave Trapper a high five. Trapper blushed behind his monobrow. Mitchell entered the chorus and made another spin move in the center of the room. He bobbed his head up and down and sang as loud as he could.

“Do you think he’s the worst yet?” Booby asked.

“He’s the worst I’ve ever heard,” I volunteered.

“One and a half minutes!” Zeke said.

Mitchell stopped in the middle of his spin and looked at me. He threw in a little bit of falsetto on one of the high notes and I had to spin around to keep him from seeing the smile on my face. I looked at the opposite wall, and strummed furiously on my air guitar hoping he hadn’t caught me. The rest of the guys were starting to come unglued. Mitchell stopped singing, if you could call it that. He played his air guitar for a few more bars before he stopped that too.

“Two minutes!” Zeke said, but all of us knew Trapper’s record was safe. Mitchell was starting to get wise.

“I think you’re still the king Trapper.” Zeke said. He had abandoned his air guitar to look up and down from his wristwatch to Mitchell.

“Maybe so, but Mitchell’s voice is worse than mine,” Trapper said. “At least I hope he’s worse than me! He’s got the worst voice I’ve ever heard.”

“I agree,” Booby said. “Mitchell is by far the worst singer in the house.”

“Two minutes fifteen seconds!” Zeke said.

We all watched Mitchell pull the headphones off his head. His cheeks flushed bright red the second they cleared his ears.

“You tricked me!” he said. “You bastards!”

We all crowded around Mitchell. Booby clapped him on the back while Trapper poked him in the ribs with his index finger.

“You are the worst!” Booby said. “You are the absolute worst singer we’ve ever heard!”

“I know it,” Mitchell said. “I’ve never been able to sing for shit.” He shook his head and finally smiled. “That’s a good trick though … you dirty rotten bastards!”

I joined the others in ribbing Mitchell. I slapped him on the back and teased him as best I could while Zeke looked down the hallway for another victim. It was a first class trick all right, one of the best I’d ever seen, but I couldn’t help but think about the look on their faces when they’d
pulled it on me. I couldn’t help but think that maybe I could sing after all. Maybe I’d take the chance and try it sometime if everything was just right. Maybe it would become another part of what seemed to occupy a bigger and bigger part of me with each passing day. I couldn’t deny what was happening. I still enjoyed all of the other things, but I couldn’t stop thinking about the music. It kept sneaking into my head just like the tide crawls up on the beach at the end of the day.

14
Scrimmage

Nick’s shoes didn’t look right. He had black high-tops with long cleats like the linemen wore. They looked strange on him because he always had the low-top shoes with the short plastic cleats in high school. The best players got the low-top shoes in high school because they weighed half as much as the high-tops. It wasn’t just the shoes that looked wrong on him though; it was a lot of the other things too. None of his equipment looked like it fit. He looked like the guy who was last in line when they handed out the uniforms.

The pads in his pants drooped down past his kneecaps and his practice jersey had holes in it. There was a faded number sixty-six on the back of it that I could barely read, and his helmet had three spots where the paint had been chipped off. It looked too big for him too, and it had one of those old-fashioned facemasks without a bar in the center. In high school Nick always had the best equipment on the team. At the university it looked like he got stuck with the dregs.

I watched the offensive tackle come off the ball at the snap. He was at least six-four and must have weighed two-eighty. He ran three steps, and slammed into the tackling dummy. Nick planted his right foot and braced for the impact, but he couldn’t help being knocked back three feet by the larger man. He had to accept the fact that he couldn’t hold his ground with the big lumbering lineman, but he looked determined never to get knocked off his feet. Every now and then the lineman would try to steam roll him … he’d just try to run him right over, but Nick kept his weight down low and always managed to keep his feet. I could see how frustrated the offensive tackle was getting.

I’d watched Nick labor on the scout team for a couple of weeks now. He and ten other guys who wore ill-fitted gear held blocking dummies in different positions on the field so the first team offense could run their plays against the formations the opposing team would likely use the next week. Play after play they absorbed the impact of the linemen. Sometimes a blocking back
would run up and smack into the foam-padded tackling dummy, and every now and then a wide receiver would streak in from the side like an assassin. Nick hated the scout team. He hated it because he couldn't move and he didn't have a chance to react, but most of all he missed dishing out a little bit of the hitting. I knew him better than anybody else, and what he needed was a chance to run, shed a block, and hit somebody.

Coach Fitzpatrick twirled his silver whistle around his finger as he pushed his big gut out in front of himself and strutted across the field. He looked like he'd seen enough. He'd won on the road against Illinois and Utah, and the first home game was next week against a conference opponent. The offense had been running their standard package for the past ten days, and he needed to see how they reacted. Football was a game of speed and reaction. He blew his whistle and everybody on the field stopped.

"I want the scout team to put the dummies in a pile on the edge of the field," he said, as he turned to his assistant coach. "Let's run them live for a few plays, and see if the O-line can pick up a blitz."

Nick threw his blocking dummy in a pile on the sideline and joined the other players on the defensive side of the ball. He lined up at the weak side linebacker spot, and started jumping up and down in quick little hops as if he needed to take a pee. He'd have to be careful. He'd have to control the adrenaline that he was feeling right now. After all, it was just practice. It was just the scout team running through a few plays at half speed.

The offensive team broke their huddle and lined up across from the defense. Nick shifted his position to the right a little bit, and then turned his eyes toward the ball. I could see his plan of attack. He was headed off the backside of the defensive end, right between the offensive guard and the tackle. His job was to see if he could get close to the quarterback, and he intended to take the shortest route possible.

When the ball was snapped the players all moved at once and Nick ran toward the gap between the offensive linemen. The tackle moved toward his right and punched Nick in the chest with both fists. He grabbed him by the jersey and pulled him up close, almost lifting him up off the ground, and then shoved him back as the whistle blew.

"Not through my gap asshole!" I heard him say.

I looked at the tower of human flesh pointing his fat stubby index finger at Nick. His gut hung over his belt, and the skin sticking out from beneath his jersey jiggled when he spoke. The face behind the mask was round and mean with big chipmunk-like cheeks that bulged out from each side of a smirking mouth. His eyes were small and black, and a few strands of sweat-
stained brown hair stuck to his forehead. He glared at Nick before turning on his heel, and walking back to the huddle.

Fitzpatrick blew his silver whistle. "Okay defense," he said. "Let's blitz the linebackers again, and bring the free safety this time."

Nick went back to his position after a long look at the tackle. He lined up outside of the defensive end again and watched as the offensive linemen jogged to the line of scrimmage. Their big bellies sloshed up and down with each step as they waddled toward the ball and got down in their stance. Nick started bouncing up and down again, but this time he moved faster. He hopped up and down in short rapid little twitches that couldn't mask his intentions. I saw the smile behind his facemask too, and I knew there was going to be a show. I was the only one likely to see it because everybody watching had a different agenda. Coach Fitzpatrick wanted his team to look good on national TV next weekend. The assistant coaches wanted their units to look prepared, and the players wanted to look good for the coaches. But I intended to watch the game within a game that Nick and the tackle were about to play.

He moved the instant the ball did. He bolted across the line on the outside hip of the defensive end, and penetrated two yards into the offensive backfield before the offensive linemen knew what had happened. The tackle back-pedaled, bringing his body and arms up to receive the pass rushers just as Nick turned sharply to his right and accelerated parallel to the line of scrimmage. The lineman didn’t see him until the last instant, and it was something he wasn’t prepared for. He was used to pass rushers coming from the front, not from the side. He turned to receive the blow a fraction of a second too late, and that was all Nick needed.

He accelerated into the larger man and buried his helmet into the tackle's soft belly just below the sternum. I could see the big man sag as the air rushed out of him. His head came down and Nick brought the heel of his right hand up, striking the tackle on the bottom of the chin. It was a short and powerful blow done so skillfully and quickly that no one but me saw it. The fat-ass tackle didn’t notice it that’s for sure, because he never knew what hit him. His jaw snapped up and the two rows of teeth crashed into each other. The big man started to fall, but before he hit the ground Nick planted his left foot and rammed his right knee into the lineman’s right inner thigh. I could hear him groan all the way from the bleachers as he fell to the ground. He sounded like a great big tree does just as it topples over into a heap. Nick spun away from him and saw nothing but a clear path to the quarterback.
Running on adrenaline and instinct he rushed forward and crashed into the quarterback. The sound of Fitzpatrick's silver whistle filled the air at the same instant the two bodies collided, and everybody stopped except for Nick.

The players and coaches looked with horror at the quarterback with the red jersey who was squashed flat on the turf. By the time Nick had reached his feet Coach Fitzpatrick had run over in front of him and grabbed his facemask and jerked him around so violently that they both almost fell down. Fitzpatrick got right in Nick's face, his round red nose just an inch from the end of the crossbar on the helmet.

"What's your name sixty six?" he shouted. He was livid. His eyes were bugged out and his face was flushed red and his neck veins bulged out with each word.

Nick stammered as he stumbled backward.

"Strode …" he said. "It's Strode … Nick Strode."

"Do you see the quarterback you just knocked down number sixty six?" Fitzpatrick was screaming. He grabbed Nick's facemask again and jerked it toward the quarterback who was slowly getting up from the grass.

"Yes sir," Nick said. He was collecting himself and beginning to realize his sin. He had committed the ultimate practice squad transgression.

"I don't like my quarterback getting hurt by somebody on the practice squad sixty six!" Fitzpatrick said as he smacked the back of Nick's helmet with the palm of his hand. "He starts for us next week…. You don't! When I see a guy trying to hurt my quarterback in practice, I have to wonder how smart he is."

Fitzpatrick was shaking Nick's facemask from side to side now. The spit sprayed out from his mouth as he shouted each word. He pushed Nick away and looked at the tackle lying on the ground. The big pile of blubber was rolling from side to side and moaning. One hand was on his jaw and the other on his inner thigh. He couldn't breath, and one of the trainers was trying to pull up on the belt loop in front of his pants.

"What the hell's the matter with him?" Fitzpatrick screamed.

"He's got the wind knocked out of him," the trainer said, "and it looks like he's got a couple of broken teeth."

"God damn it!" Fitzpatrick shouted. He looked back at Nick and pointed his finger at the lineman writhing on the ground.

"He starts for us too," he screamed. "What the hell were you thinking about?" He finally let go of Nick's facemask and said, "Hit the showers sixty six!"
Nick took off his helmet and walked toward the locker room. He turned to look back at the offensive tackle. The big sack-of-shit had just managed to get up on one knee. His helmet was off and he cradled his head in his hands. A trainer helped him stand, and he limped off the field. The big man’s eyes met Nick’s for just a moment and he nodded his head in deference ever so slightly before he hobbled away. Nick didn’t look back. He turned around and walked straight to the showers.

It was the first time that I realized Fitzpatrick had made up his mind about who would play long before the season started. He could measure size and speed, but he couldn’t seem to measure a guy’s heart. I wasn’t surprised at what had happened. What surprised me was the fact that after one and a half years the Head Coach didn’t even know Nick’s name. He was supposed to be a good coach, but for a supposedly smart guy he sure didn’t see much. Nick wasn’t the biggest or the fastest, but he was the best. He was the best there ever was, and the fat-ass tackle and I were the only two guys on the field who seemed to know it.

15
Raunch Dinner

I waited with Mitchell and Dudley outside the dining room. It was Friday afternoon and the whole house was shaking. Tower of Power exploded from Zeke’s stereo upstairs, and the notes floated down the stairwell and filled the living room where we stood. Every Friday night started out like this. First there was Raunch Dinner and then about half the guys went over to Stateline. They’d stay there until the bars closed, and then they’d come home and start a new party in the basement. Once the house started shaking at Raunch Dinner, it didn’t stop until early Saturday morning.

Raunch Dinner was a peculiar ritual. Nobody knew when or why it started or exactly who invented it. The commonly held theory was that it released the stress that accumulated during the week, but most of us thought it was just an excuse to raise hell.

Our dinners were normally pretty formal affairs. There were ten tables in the dining room and each one was big enough for eight guys. An upper classman always sat at the head of the table and it was his job to enforce a strict set of rules. You couldn’t drink your soup or lick your plate at dinner. You couldn’t swear or throw food. If you got caught, the guy at the head of the table would put his fist on the table and push up his thumb as if flipping a quarter and say: “You’ve been flipped.” That meant you had to pay a nickel that was collected in a big jar and kept
in the kitchen. The fate of the money was unknown, but most of us believed that Margaret used it to buy scotch. Dinners during the week were just like eating at home, except stricter than most of the guys were used to. We learned to eat like gentlemen during the week, but on Fridays we sat down to Raunch Dinner and everything changed.

Raunch Dinner had no rules. Anybody could do anything at Raunch Dinner and the more outrageous the stunt, the more it was appreciated. There was always a sense of anticipation every Friday afternoon outside the doors of the dining room. Nobody knew what to expect. Every single week brought us something new and even more scandalous than the last. That’s why all of us couldn’t help but move around restlessly as we waited for Raunch Dinner and listened to Tower of Power belt out “What is Hip.”

The doors swung open and Cougar walked out wearing a pair of Cowboy boots and a big white apron. He didn’t have a shirt on, and his legs were bare from the tops of his boots to the bottom of his apron. He played the dinner chimes and shouted.

"Come and get it you maggots!"

He turned around and walked back through the doors and we all noticed that except for his apron and his Cowboy boots, Cougar wasn’t wearing anything else. His hairy butt was sticking out the back of his apron and his ass looked like one of the beaver pelts hanging on the chapter room wall. It didn’t matter what part of Cougar you looked at or from what angle, he was the hairiest guy in the house for sure … maybe the hairiest guy in the whole world.

We stampeded through the door, rushing past Cougar and scrambling for a seat. We gave him a wide berth. With all that hair and all that nakedness, we thought it best to keep our distance. Somebody yelled: "Eat my shorts Cougar!" and then somebody else shouted: “Take my shorts Cougar … Please!”

I sat next to Poopsie who was trying to drink milk through a straw he had placed in his nose. I reached across his plate for a piece of bread and he leaned sideways in his chair and farted. Dudley responded by fanning frantically with his salad plate. Woody launched a pea with his spoon that traveled over two tables and hit Crasher in the ear. Crasher looked for the offender, but quickly realized it was useless.

I spotted Nick as he came through the door.

"Over here!" I shouted. “Come over here!”

Nick stepped up on a chair and walked over the top of one of the tables, squashing The Faceman’s Jell-O beneath his sneaker in the process.

“Fuck you Strode.”
“Not today Face.”
He sat right across from me and we all watched Woody load up another pea in his spoon.

“Why don’t you use two?” Nick asked.
“Good idea,” Woody responded.
He added another pea to the spoon and then pulled it back with his thumb. He swiveled in his chair like a radar antenna looking for a target.

“Who’s next,” he said.
“How about The Faceman,” Dudley said.
The Faceman turned around when he heard his name.
“What did you say Dudley?” he said. “Shit! I wish you’d talk louder.”
He had no more turned back toward his plate when both peas hit him in the back of the head.

“Goddamn it! What was that?”
“Eat hearty, pea brain,” Dudley said.
“What did you say? Goddamn you Dudley! Why don’t you talk louder?”
“Are you gonna play this week Nick?” Poopsie asked. He’d given up on the straw, and was now dipping a carrot into his potatoes.

“I hope so,” Nick said. “All I need is some time. If I can just get some minutes I’ll be able to show them what I can do.”

“What about Pursell? He’s gonna play isn’t he?”
“Of course he’ll play,” Nick said in astonishment. “He’ll start for sure. He’s an all-American.”

“What position do you play?” Woody asked.
“They move me around a lot,” Nick responded.
“Are you gonna play offense or defense?” Woody persisted.
“They play me on defense most of the time,” Nick said. “At linebacker. But I can play running back too, if they’d just give me a chance.”

“I heard Fitzpatrick say on the radio that there aren’t any more two-way players. He says the game’s too specialized now.” Woody was trying to get his spoon to dangle from the end of his nose.

“Yeah … maybe,” Nick said, as he stirred his peas into his potatoes.
“Did you get to travel last week?” Woody asked, as the spoon slipped off of his nose and landed on the floor. He didn’t bother to pick it up.

“No … this is the first game I’ll be suited up for.”

“Are we gonna win a championship this year?” Poopsie asked. “Fitzpatrick says we’re gonna be conference champs.”

“Coach says we’ve got a good chance,” Nick said. “He says this team is special.”

“I heard he almost took a job in Texas last year,” Dudley said. “Rumor is he’ll be gone next year.”

“What did you say Dudley?” Woody asked, as he loaded up another pea.

Nick shook his head. “I don’t think so,” he said. “This is the only place he wants to be. He says he’s worked his whole life to get here, and he doesn’t plan on leaving anytime soon. He lives and breathes for this university. He wouldn’t leave the players he’s recruited. From what he says, he’ll never leave for another school.”

I turned my head to the sound of some voices in the corner of the dining room. There was a table of eight guys who were pounding their silverware on the table and chanting.

“Piss Pot Pete! … Piss Pot Pete!”

The upper classmen at my table took their forks and spoons and pounded them on the table in rhythm with the voices too.

“Piss Pot Pete! … Piss Pot Pete!”

I didn’t know who Piss Pot Pete was, but I decided I wanted to find out, so I picked up my fork and spoon and pounded the table with the rest of the guys.

“Piss Pot Pete! … Piss Pot Pete!”

I heard Margaret’s voice from the kitchen. “Cougar!” she shouted. “Get out there and give them what they want before they drive me nuts.”

The door opened and Cougar walked out, still dressed in just his Cowboy boots and his apron. He stepped up on a chair and then on top of one of the tables. He held his hands up and the room quieted down. He let us linger in anticipation for a moment before he started a poem.
He walked slowly as he talked, his boots clomping down on the table with every fourth syllable or so.

“Old schoolmarm Lil lived way out west
and fuckin’ was the sport that she liked best”

He walked up the table, and the plates and silverware scattered with every step of his Cowboy boots.

“Then out of the hills came Piss Pot Pete
With sixteen pounds of swingin’ meat.”

Cougar walked faster as the poem progressed and with each word he stamped his boots a little harder on the tabletop. His voice grew louder too, and his hairy bare ass jiggled through the back of his white chef’s apron. A pea whizzed past his head, but he didn’t notice. He was too busy concentrating on the poem and placing his boots on the slippery surface.

“It was as long as your arm and as thick as your wrist
With a head on the end as big as your fist.”

“Maybe you should gain some weight,” Poopsie said to Nick. He had another pea in his spoon and he was aiming it at Cougar. “One ninety’s pretty small for a linebacker. Maybe if you got up to two-twenty you’d get more playing time.” He let go of the pea catapult and it hit Cougar in the shoulder.

“They lasted days and weeks and hours
and pulled up trees and shrubs and flowers,” Cougar shouted.

Crasher placed a paper cup filled with milk in front of Cougar who didn’t hesitate a second before he crushed it with the heel of his cowboy boot. Milk sprayed out from the ruptured cup and showered everybody at the table. More milk cups appeared in front of him and Cougar continued, crushing a cup with each step. Milk splattered everywhere and ran down the tops of the tables in tiny rivers.
“They did it standin’ and they did it lyin’
If he’d a had wings he’d a fucked her flyin’”

I saw Nick pour salt into Dudley’s milk.
“Maybe he’s right,” he said to me.
“Who’s right?” I asked.
“Maybe Poopsie’s right about getting bigger. If I could just get bigger....”
“You’re big enough.”
“The coaches don’t think so.”
“All you need is minutes,” I said. “Once you get some minutes they’ll have to let you play.”

Cougar stepped on the last cup of milk as he finished his poem. Piss Pot Pete had managed to vanquish the fair schoolmarm ‘Lil, but not before a truly monumental effort on both of their parts. I wondered if the same story might have a different ending in one of the sorority houses. Cougar climbed off the table and clip-clopped toward the kitchen door in his milk-splattered cowboy boots. He stopped before walking through the door and picked up a plate of green Jell-O. He waved it beneath his nose a few times before slurping it down in one big gulp.

The guys in the corner expressed their appreciation by throwing food and milk-soaked napkins at him. He took a bow and disappeared into the kitchen.

“Do you think I’d get minutes if I were bigger?” Nick asked me.

Poopsie had scooped up a large blob of mashed potatoes with his index finger and was pointing it at me. He pulled his finger back and paused for a second, enjoying the site of watching me squirm in my chair.

“Maybe,” I said. “But all you need is the minutes.” I faked right and then left, trying to bait Poopsie into launching the potatoes, but he didn’t fall for it. Instead he put his finger into his mouth.

“I’ve been trying to get bigger,” Nick said. “I’ve been lifting weights every other day just like they told me to, but it’s not working.”

“It takes time,” I said.

“I’ve been doing it for four months.”

“Maybe you’re getting stronger without getting bigger,” I said. Poopsie had scooped up another finger full of potatoes.
“Maybe I’m stronger, but I’m not bigger. I’ve got to get bigger if I’m going to get any playing
time.”
“Once you get into the game … once they see what you can do … you’ll get more time.
That’s all it will take.”

Nick put his chin on top of his right fist. “I hope your right,” he said. “I sure hope your
right.”

He looked about as blue as I’d ever seen him. I knew how hard it was for him to sit
around and wait for his chance, but I also knew that was all he needed. He was the best there
ever was, and even a moron like Fitzpatrick would figure it out eventually. It was just a matter of
time.

“Don’t worry Nick. Everything will work out.”
“Whatever you say Brooks.”

Poopsie and Woody stood up. The others were wandering out of the dining room and
arranging their rides to Stateline. Cougar walked up and down the isles with a big brown garbage
bag collecting paper cups and plates. The frogs on clean up crew were coming through the
doors of the kitchen with brooms and mops.

“Lets have the paper you maggots!” Cougar said, as he shoved the big plastic bag
toward us.

Nick turned toward Cougar with a blob of potatoes perched on the end of his spoon.

“We’re still eating Cougar!” he said.

“Eat my shorts,” Cougar replied.

Nick lowered the spoon. “You don’t have any,” Nick said.

“Any what?”

“Any shorts.”

Cougar turned around and bent over. “Eat this,” he said.

Dudley dropped his spoon. “I’ve lost my appetite,” he said.

Nick stood up and I did too. Cougar’s hairy butt was enough to make anybody lose their
appetite

“What are you doing tonight?” I asked.

“I promised Margaret I’d play cards.”

“Can I play?”

He shook his head at Cougar who still remained bent over with his beaver-pelt butt
pointing right at us.
“Sure,” he said. “You can play. But don’t bring too much money.”

I didn’t think Nick would ever get any bigger. He’d been one of those guys who looked eighteen when he was in the eighth grade. He’d filled out a little the last couple of years since high school, but other than that his body hadn’t changed much.

It was starting to sink in that he was undersized compared to the rest of the players, and that he wasn’t as fast as some of them, but I didn’t doubt he could make it. He had everything that really mattered. He had a knack for being in the right place at the right time. He always knew the solution when everybody else didn’t have a clue. But most of all he was a winner. He knew how to win better than anybody I’d ever known. He was the best I’d ever seen … he was the best there ever was … and he’d get his shot sooner or later.

16
Poker

"That's fifty cents to you Nuisance."

I looked across the table at Margaret. Nobody knew how old she was. The best guess was somewhere around seventy. Tonight she wore a faded dress with a wide black belt around her waist and black shoes with foam-rubber heels a half-inch tall. A string of cheap beads, that were supposed to look like pearls, hung around her neck. She had a bottle of Johnny Walker Red Label on the table, and a Styrofoam cup filled with ice right next to it.

"Just a minute," Nick said, as he rounded up two quarters from the pile of change on the table and tossed them into the pot. He kept a dime in the palm of his right hand and looked back at Margaret. She called him Nuisance and nothing else. Nobody else called him Nuisance, just Margaret. I had the feeling she liked it that way.

"What about that dime?" she said. "Do you want to lose that too?"

Her glasses looked like a relic from the nineteen forties. They were made of translucent faded-pink plastic. They sat on the bridge of her nose with the help of two small brown pads that left permanent depressions in the weathered skin of her nose. The lenses swept up like teardrops toward the outer part of her eyebrows. When the glasses slipped down on her nose, Margaret looked over the top of the frames, not wanting to tip her hand. She watched Nick flip the coin into the pot.

"You’ll have to pay at least another dime to see my hand," he said.
Margaret smiled from behind her cards. A camel straight hung from the corner of her mouth, and the smoke drifted up in front of her right eye. She threw a quarter into the pot.

"That's fifteen cents to you," she said. "Let's see if you'll pay to see my cards."

I'd folded my cards a long time ago. I'd been folding my hand all night. I didn't start out with much money, and Margaret had taken most of it early on. I'd played conservatively and kept my eye on Nick. When he nodded his head I folded. It was the only way I could manage to hang around while they played. Margaret was real serious about her poker.

Nick sorted through the change on the table. He didn't keep his money in tidy stacks of nickels, dimes, and quarters like I did. He kept it scattered all over the place. It was harder to figure out just how much money he had that way. I knew Margaret had most of mine, but I couldn't tell how much or her money Nick had. He pushed the dime and nickel forward.

"Are you callin' the hand?" she asked.

He tried to look into her eyes through the haze of smoke that surrounded her head. She slowly moved her cigarette to her lips and took a drag. I could hear her mouth make a sucking noise as she pulled the smoke through the tobacco. She put her elbow on the table and let the cigarette dangle in front of her face as she blew the smoke out of her nose. She motioned toward the money.

"Well ... are you callin' the hand or not!"

She always let the ash on her cigarette burn until it started to bend before she flicked it into the ashtray. It was common knowledge around the house that nobody had ever seen her drop a single ember. She held her cigarette perfectly still now, as she looked down at the two dollar and twenty cent pot. The ash hung precariously from the end of the paper.

"I call," Nick said, and he put two pair on the table.

Margaret smiled with yellow teeth and placed three kings on top of Nick's cards. She took a drink of her Red Label and sighed with satisfaction.

"College boys!" she said. "Don't make shit for card players! I've never had a job with so much easy, tax-free money. If I'd known it was this profitable, I'd have started cooking for you fraternity boys in my twenties." She dumped a pile of ashes on top of the plastic dinner plate she used for an ashtray.

"Shit Margaret!" Nick said. "If you'd been working here when you were twenty, you wouldn't get any cooking done. You'd be hopping in and out of bed with every guy on the sleeping porch. You'd be pregnant before the first semester."
Margaret smiled as she reached out and scooped the money toward her. She coughed, and the phlegm rattled up from deep down inside her lungs.

“You’re probably right Nuisance, and yours would be the first bed I’d stop at ... you wouldn’t have to worry about sloppy seconds from me.”

Her eyes crinkled up behind her glasses and then she and Nick both rocked their heads back and laughed. Their laughter rattled off the windows and the walls. It echoed through the big empty room and then Nick shook his head and leaned back in his chair and placed his hands behind his neck.

“You gross me out Margaret,” he said. “You really do.”

I watched her scoop up the cards and straighten them out on the table. She snapped half the deck from one hand to the other and started to shuffle. Her old wrinkled hands moved swiftly across the table while Nick and I watched her like a hawk. I was starting to realize that this was more than just a card game. It was Patton and Rommel in the deserts of North Africa. It was Frazier and Ali under the bright lights of Manilla. One could not achieve greatness without the other. A champion needed a worthy opponent, and just like all great adversaries in all great battles there was grudging respect on both sides the table. They fought like alley cats over the nickels and dimes on the table, but they just couldn’t seem to get enough of each other.

The cards flew toward me and I picked them up one at a time and anted my quarter. I was down to about three bucks.

“How long have you two known each other?” she asked.

I waited for Nick to answer but he deferred to me. He seemed especially interested in his hand.

“Forever,” I answered.

“Forever is a long time,” she said. “I bid a dime.”

I had a pair of threes so I put my dime in and Nick followed.

“How many cards?” she asked me.

“I’ll take three.”

I was still trying to figure out how the whole thing worked. I thought I knew about poker. All men were supposed to know about poker. It was like knowing about baseball, or camping, or how to fix your car. Nobody was supposed to teach you. When you became a man you were just supposed to know about manly things, and poker always scored high when it came to manliness. It was something all men enjoyed while they sat around green felt-covered tables and drank whisky and smoked skinny little brown cigars. I was eighteen, so I was getting close to
being a man, at least that’s what was supposed to happen. I didn’t feel like a man though, and it showed when it got down to playing poker. I’d quickly realized that all I knew was a big muddled mess of poker jargon. Did a straight beat a flush? Or was it the other way around? Where did a full house fit into the picture? Was it a good idea to take two cards or three when you had a pair? I looked down at my cards. I’d gotten no help from the draw. Margaret bid a quarter. Was she bluffing? I looked at Nick. He just shrugged so I folded.

“That’s a quarter to you Nuisance,” she said.

It was worth thirty-five cents just to hang around with the two of them. They played cards without any apparent effort at all. Margaret flipped the cards across the table and they slid two feet on the smooth surface before they stopped under the waiting palm of Nick, who didn’t even bother to look up. He moved the new cards up to greet the old ones, and then tossed his coins into the pile to match Margaret’s. They danced a tango of poker. They threw nickels and dimes and quarters into the pile of money until the draws were completed and the bluffing done. They always paused for a moment at the end of the bidding just to savor it. I could see Margaret looking over the top of her cards at Nick. She looked hard through her plastic glasses, searching for a sign of weakness. She shook her head and sighed.

“I call the hand,” she said, as she put down a single pair. “What have you got?”

Nick put down two pair with kings high. “Sorry Margaret,” he said. “But I’m gonna have to take your money.” He put his arms around the cash and pulled it toward him.

She lit another cigarette. “I’m just fattening you up before I properly pluck you,” she said, as she threw the match onto the plastic dinner plate. She took a long drag, and exhaled slowly as she asked, “Are you going to get any playing time tomorrow?”

“Once the season starts, the coaches have their minds made up about who’s going to play,” Nick said, as he shuffled the cards. “I’ve been working hard in practice, and I’ve just got to trust them to find me some playing time.”

“Shit Nuisance!” she said. “Don’t ever trust your coaches.”

“What?” he asked, as he looked up from his cards.

“They don’t give a damn about you. College football is big business now. They’re only worried about their ranking and their TV ratings and what job they’re going to take next season. They could care less about being fair. The money’s the only thing they care about. They’re almost as bad as the pros.” She leaned back in her chair.

“If I could just get some playing time,” Nick said. “I could show them what I can do if I could only get some minutes.”
“Yeah, yeah, I know all about that,” she interrupted as she waved her cigarette back and forth. "But why do you want to play football anyway? Why do you want to take the risk of getting hurt? Shit! It's not worth it. Don't put all that effort into football. What about your school work?"

I hadn't even thought about Nick not playing football.

"I'll get by," he said.

"Get by! You didn't get by so well last year playing on the freshman team. You need to start thinking about studying. You need to think about passing that economics course you flunked last year. How many more chances do you get before they kick your ass out anyway?"

“What economics course?” I asked.

He ignored me.

“What economics course?” I asked again, but he didn’t even look up from his cards.

"I'll pass it this year," he said. "I'll figure out a way to do both."

She sat up straight in her chair and pointed the orange ash of her cigarette at Nick.

"Listen to me Nuisance,” she said. “You'd better start thinking about staying in school, not playing football. College football is a circus. It's not the sport you used to know. It's a business that has nothing to offer you. The game will use you."

“I love to play.”

“We’d all love to play.”

“I have to play.”

“And what the hell is that supposed to mean?” she asked. Her cigarette hung from the corner of her mouth, and it gyrated wildly as she spoke.

“Well … what else am I supposed to do? It's the only thing I'm good at.”

“What do you mean? I think you do some things better than anybody else.”

“Like what Margaret?” Nick asked. He was starting to sound pissed off. "Name one thing I do around here that somebody else can't do as well … or better?"

Margaret smiled as she tapped her index finger on the table. "I think you lose at poker better than anybody I know."

"I'll remember that Margaret. I'll get you for that statement."

Margaret flipped a one-inch ash onto the plastic plate as she took a long look at Nick.

“You can't find yourself in the games Nuisance. There comes a time when all the games have been played, and if you only find yourself in them, you'll be lost when they stop. Don't look for the answers in football, and don't hurt yourself running into those big goons on the practice squad … as if I give a shit what happens to you."
"I can take care of myself."

"Yeah sure."

She picked up her hand and anted a quarter. She looked at Nick again for a moment before studying her cards. I put my quarter in the pot and so did Nick. I guess I had to admit that it was hard for me to think about him without thinking about the football team or the wrestling team or some other contest involving manly things like poker. But listening to Margaret made me realize it was a lot more than that. The thing that separated him from everybody else was his ability to compete. When the competition started to get hot and the other guys started to falter, he always seemed to get even better. The tougher the competition was, the more he liked it, at least as far as the games were concerned. It sounded like he hadn't gotten involved enough in the competition of his economics class though. It was the first time I'd heard about it.

"So what did you do with your sorry-ass this summer?" she asked absent-mindedly.

Nick answered just as absently as he fingered through his cards. "I worked in the harvest."

"You saved my life too," I added, as I reached for the burn on the side of my neck. But they both just ignored me.

"I watched almost all of the Olympics," Nick said. "The Olympics were great."

"And just what was so great about the Olympics?" she asked, as she called the hand. "I'll take one card." Her index finger twitched impatiently as she motioned toward Nick. "Come on! Give me the card Nuisance."

Nick spat the cards off the top of the deck toward her. "Even a hard-core cynic like you has to like the Olympics," he said. "What about Lasse Viren? What about Mark Spitz? He won seven gold medals. I'd give anything to win just one."

Nick had stopped dealing the cards and was looking across the table at Margaret. She looked right straight back at him; her right elbow propped up on the table and her hand holding a smoldering cigarette beside her right cheek. Her index finger twitched again.

"No need to stop dealing the cards," she said. "You can talk and deal at the same time."

"But how can you not like the Olympics? Everybody likes the Olympics." Nick continued, as he pushed the card toward her. She pulled it across the table, and lifted the corner. "The Olympics are just a bunch of bullshit Nuisance. It will only get worse too." She looked disappointed in the card.

"The Olympics are bullshit?" Nick asked incredulously. "I don't get it," he said, as he shook his head and took two cards.
"Did you watch the Palestinians kill the Israeli's?" she asked. "That's part of the Olympics ... the politics is even a bigger part than the athletics ... the politics and the money." She tapped her fingers on the tabletop. "Powerful rich guys are getting richer and more powerful off people like you who are glued to the television set watching their advertising. Don't get me wrong. I like the athletes. It's the Olympics I can't stand. It's a bunch of propaganda, politics, and profit for the media. Television is ruining the Olympics. It's the worst thing to ever happen to the Olympics."

She moved two of her cards to the outside of her hand. "Television is selling the site to the highest bidder. Every country tries to out-do the other. Every advertiser tries to get a bigger piece of the pie. Every tin-pot-piece-of-shit political activist tries to make a statement at the expense of the games. They'd be a lot better off taking the athletes to Greece every four years, and leaving the television cameras behind. I'll raise you a buck," she said. I thought she looked a little reluctant to do it.

"But what about Olga Korbet? Even you have to admit that was special," Nick said.

"Olga Korbet made a nice story didn't she?" Margaret said. "The media ate that one right up, but she's just another pawn in the corporate greed machine. She'll be selling soda pop in another month."

"But she's a Russian!" Nick said. "How can she sell soda pop if she's in Russia?" Nick matched the pot, and added another quarter.

"Mark my words," she said. "Olga Korbet will live in this country someday, and if there's any possible way she can sell soda pop, corporate America will find it."

"But she's a Russian Margaret! The Russians will never let her leave! It's a communist country!"

"It is now, but things have a way of changing," she said. She looked up from her cards and stared across the table at Nick. "Life is about change. Sometimes it's slow, but it never stops coming. You either adapt to the change, or get out of the way."

Nick slid his three kings onto the table. Margaret cackled as she slapped an ace high straight on top of his cards. She reached for the money with both hands but Nick stopped her.

"Just one more thing," he said.

She stopped half hunched over the money, her cigarette smoldering on the plastic dinner plate.

"I thought you should know I have a pair of five's too," he said, as he carefully placed the cards in front of her nose.
Margaret looked up ... astonished, and then her cracked lips slowly parted and revealed two rows of tobacco-stained teeth. She laughed, quietly at first, then louder and louder until she collapsed back into her chair and coughed up a thick glob of yellow-green phlegm. Her whole body shook as she coughed up the sticky goober. She swallowed it down and then looked back at Nick.

"You son-of-a-bitch!" she said. "You suckered me right in! It was worth the money just to watch you do it!" There was admiration in her eyes. She didn't even try to hide it.

Nick smiled too and reached for the money.

"You're good at the games aren't you?" Margaret said, as she leaned back and lifted her cigarette from the plastic dinner plate. The ash dangled off the end of the short butt and glowed orange as she sucked it. Smoke boiled out of her mouth as she spoke. "You're very good Nuisance. I get tired of fleecing all the other guys in this house. You're the only real competition I've got around here. After fifteen years you're the only guy who can give me a game. As a matter of fact, next to me, you just might be the best poker player in the house, maybe the best in the whole world."

I knew that she knew what I knew. I'd had the growing suspicion that she was more than just the old battle-ax cook-of-the-house. Most of the guys didn't give her the credit she deserved because she wanted it that way. She'd singled out Nick because she saw the same things that I did. The two of them were connected. They could anticipate each other's actions while playing cards, and I had the feeling they could anticipate each other's thoughts too. I'd done that with him my whole life, but I knew I couldn't do it with her. I didn't think I ever would. In most ways she just plain mystified me, but after our first night of poker I knew ours was not a relationship with each other. It was a relationship that went right through Nick.

Game Day

It was Saturday morning and I was enjoying the warmth of the sunlight as it worked its way through the covers of my bed. I was one of the last guys left on the sleeping porch. I watched everybody file out one by one and noticed that they had an extra bounce in their step
today. Every one of them walked a little faster and looked a little bit more awake than usual. It was because of the energy in the house. It started in the basement and worked its way right up through to the sleeping porch. It infected everybody in the house. It was the weekend. The weather was clear and warm. There were no classes to worry about, and fifteen thousand college kids were waking up with one thing on their mind. It was the first home football game of the season.

I got out of bed and went down the stairs to the second floor of the old section. I walked past Zeke’s room and felt the force of the speakers pushing air as Bachmann Turner Overdrive thundered out from underneath the door into the hallway. I started snapping my fingers to the beat of Takin’ Care of Business until I got to the end of the hall and noticed Booby attaching two pints of whiskey to the inner part of his lower legs with masking tape.

“What’s up Booby?”

“Getting ready for the game,” he said. He didn’t bother to look up. His long blonde hair dangled down in front of his eyes as he tried to hold the bottles and pull the tape off the roll at the same time. “They check us at the gate sometimes, but so far they haven’t figured this one out.”

He held the pint up against his leg with his elbow and picked at the roll of tape with his thumbnail. I kneeled down beside him and grabbed the tape. He held the bottles close to his shins while I encircled his calves with the tape. He tested them to make sure they wouldn’t fall off.

“Thanks,” he said. “Sit next to me at the game, and you can have a few shots.”

“Okay.”

I walked to my room and grabbed a towel. On most Saturday mornings eight o’clock was early enough to find some hot water in the shower, but not today. This was no ordinary Saturday. A large group of guys had gotten up early to save some seats at the stadium, and most of them had showered before they left, so when I turned the handle in the shower room stall, I found nothing but cold water there to greet me. I rinsed off as fast as I could. Scott Maxwell came in just as I was toweling off.

“Out of hot water,” I said. Maxwell looked at me as if he were in pain.

“What?” He asked.

“There’s no hot water. You’ll have to wait until the boiler heats up some more.”

Maxwell’s hands fell to his sides. He let his towel drop to the wet tile floor and he looked up at the ceiling.
“Please forgive me Lord for what I’m about to say,” he said, and then he looked back at me and screamed, "Goddamn those guys! Those dirty rotten assholes! Those fucking Goddamn inconsiderate bastards!"

I covered my grin with my towel as I dried my hair. Maxwell was the token religious guy. Nick had told me there was always at least one in every house. He was a good enough guy, at least as long as things were going his way. But whenever he needed a break, he was quick to ask the Lord for a favor, and if things didn’t turn out the way he wanted he didn’t hesitate to put his religion on hold.

“It’ll only be a few minutes.”

“Goddamn bastards!”

“Just relax. Go get a cup of coffee.”

“I don’t drink that shit!”

He picked up his towel and stomped out. I watched him leave and figured it must be hard to be the religious guy. There were just too many temptations. There were too many sinners swarming around waiting to corrupt you.

I dressed and took the stairs two at a time down to the kitchen. Margaret sat in the corner of the room reading the sports page. She used every bit of available light from the south window to illuminate the page, squinting as she read the small print. A cigarette hung from the corner of her mouth, and the smoke drifted up between her face and the newspaper. She adjusted her glasses. The ash on the end of her cigarette was only a half-inch long, and the plastic dinner plate on the table was half filled with cigarette butts.

I walked to the back of the dining room and looked at the cold cereal stacked on the table with some jugs of milk and big cans of jam and peanut butter. I grabbed a couple pieces of bread and put them into the toaster. I looked into each of the cans as I waited for my toast to pop up. Sticky goo oozed over the edge of each one of the cans and it slowly slid down the outside until it made a ring around the bottom that stuck each can tight to the table. The trick was to get the stuff onto your toast without having to touch the goo on the can. When the can was full it wasn’t a problem, but as it got used up it was impossible to put the stuff on your toast without getting sticky stuff all over yourself. The jam can was just about tapped out … it was a sticky-gooey mess, but the peanut butter can looked good. It was two thirds full at least, and the overflow had only worked part way down the outside of the can. My toast came up and I didn’t hesitate. I dipped my knife into the peanut butter and smeared it onto the bread. I filled my cereal bowl too, and carried everything on a plastic tray to a chair right across from Margaret.
"Morning Margaret. What are you doing here? Isn't it your day off?"
She squinted at me through the smoke surrounding her head. "The game!" she said.
"The game of course!"
"I didn't know you went to the games."
"Hell yes! I always go to the games. I've been to every home game for the last sixteen years. You wouldn't expect me to miss this one would you?"
I took a bite of my toast. "I guess not. Where are your seats?"
"With you! I always sit with the Sigma Tau's."
"Don't you ever get busted for sitting in the student's section?" I asked. "It seems to me you'd … sort of … stand out."
"I own some cheap seats in the end zone, but I can't see for shit over there. So every game I walk over and sit with my boy's in the student section. Nobody cares. I've never been busted because nobody gives a damn."
"Where's Nick?"
"He left with Pursell. They both had their game faces on," she said, as she pointed to the sports page. "He's not even listed on the roster. Can you believe that? Those bastards." She looked back over the top of her glasses at me. "You're runnin' a little late for a frog on game day aren't you?" she asked.
I wiped some milk off my chin with the back of my hand. "What are you talking about?"
"You should be saving seats at the stadium. Didn't anybody tell you? The frogs always save the seats. You need to get your ass up there. It's already 9:30 and the game starts at one. You're supposed to be saving my seat!"
I shoveled a few more bites of cereal into my mouth and finished the toast. "Okay," I said. "I'm on my way."
I stood up just as Booby came through the dining room door. He looked a little bow-legged, but I couldn't see the bottles beneath the pant legs of his bell-bottom jeans.
"Where are you sitting today Booby?" Margaret asked.
"I'm not going to tell you," he said.
"You'd better tell me or you just might find a little surprise in your dinner this week," she said, as she coughed up a goober and made a big deal about swallowing it down. I was sure Booby got the message.
"Regular place," he said. "Just don't show up too thirsty."
I could hear Margaret cackle as I walked across the room and bused my tray. I stepped outside onto the landing deck behind the kitchen and looked up and down the alley. I looked out onto a Greek Row that was alive with activity. Students crossed back and forth across the street dressed in crimson and gray. The trees loomed over the tops of the old houses in different shades of green, yellow, and orange, and behind them was a sky of deep blue. I couldn’t see a single cloud. I took in a deep breath and smelled it … the slight coolness in the air that was steadily being replaced by the warmth of the morning sun in early autumn. I could almost smell the excitement and the energy too. I got a hollow feeling in the center of my stomach. It happened every fall when the weather smelled like that.

I leaned back and pointed my face toward the sun. It was going to get hot as hell in the stadium, and I was glad I’d put on a pair of gym shorts under my jeans. I’d just strip down during the game if I need too. It would be as easy as that. I stepped off the landing and turned east toward Greek Row.

I walked past the houses toward the lower part of campus. I noticed how all the colors seemed brighter this time of year. I watched the swirling crowds of students too. I wondered who they were and where they were from. I looked at all the girls and wondered what they were like. They made me think about girls/sex again, and that made me think about Shee-tah/Cowgirl too. I’d been thinking about her a lot ever since the water fight. I just couldn’t seem to help it.

She wasn’t exactly pretty I guess, unforgettable would be a better word. One thing was for sure; the sight of her on top of me had been burned deep into the center of my brain. It was one of those primitive places of the brain because I couldn’t stop thinking about how her legs felt when they were wrapped around my hips. I couldn’t help but hope I’d see her in the same position again under different circumstances someday … part of the girls/sex problem again. I knew it would probably never happen, but I could always think about it. There were probably lots of kids on campus wandering around thinking about more or less the same thing I was. We were in the same time and space now, searching and moving in and out of each other’s lives just like the colors on Greek Row. We were all wondering where we were headed. It made me feel hollow in the pit of my stomach. The colors, the life, the energy, and the excitement were mixing around inside there. I wished I could catch it in a bottle so I could have a drink of it whenever I wanted.

I walked into the stadium and the colors and the largeness of it overwhelmed me. The sun bounced off the stacked rings of aluminum bleachers surrounding a dark green pit marked with white lines. Blue sky and sunshine formed the roof. The band was at the fifty-yard line and
every now and then I'd hear a horn running a scale or playing a few bars of the fight song and it made me wish I had my trumpet. All of a sudden I missed it a lot.

"Hey Brooks! Up here! We've got you a seat!"

I turned around to see the sun reflecting off of Crasher’s thick glasses. He had his shirt off, and his pale skinny body was already starting to turn pink in the sun. He was waving both arms over his head like a maniac.

I climbed the stairs and sat between he and Dudley. Booby was two rows down pouring whiskey into some paper cups filled with coke. He handed one up to me. I took off my jeans and T-shirt and gulped down the whiskey while I watched the whole spectacle of color and people unfold in front of me. My head was starting to get fuzzy, when Margaret showed up and sat right next to me. She immediately started badgering Booby for a drink until he finally sent one up her way. We were both pleasantly surprised when Dudley pulled out two pints of Southern Comfort and Crasher produced a flask of gin.

I looked for Nick as the team ran out onto the field but I couldn’t pick him out amongst all the other players. Dudley gave me a shot of Southern comfort and that slid down so fast I asked him for another, which he gave me with a comment I couldn’t quite hear. I smiled and nodded my head as if I understood him and then slammed the second shot home. The booze worked its way into my brain as Margaret downed her whiskey cola and started working on Crashers gin. She was already screaming at the coaching staff before the game had even started.

I watched the cheerleaders move up and down in front of the player’s bench. The smiles never left their faces as they kicked and pranced and waved their pom-poms. I watched their short skirts flutter around as they moved. They all looked the same. I tried to pick out the one I liked the best, but it was like candy on a shelf. I couldn’t find a favorite flavor. I wanted all of them. It was the girls/sex problem again, but I just couldn’t help but wonder what it would be like to be with all of them at once. The booze only seemed to make it worse.

I watched the sun glint off of the tubas in the band as they rocked back and forth, and I listened to the music. Through the Southern Comfort induced fog in my brain I heard it all. I heard the counter melodies and the harmonies in all the different keys. I heard all of them at once. I heard the progressions and the scales that each instrument played. I wondered about the music again. I wondered where the time would come from to do the things I wanted to do with the music.

The whole thing was becoming a blur. The sound of crashing bodies and the screaming of the crowd welled up out of the stadium in a swirling mass of color, motion, and sound that
made me lose track of time. I looked for Nick again but couldn’t find him. The Southern Comfort was almost gone. Margaret wrestled the second bottle away from Dudley, and swallowed the last two ounces.

"Put Nuisance in you bastards!" She screamed. A little bit of spit shot out from her lips as she shouted. Her face was getting pink from the sun and the shouting. She coughed up a wad of phlegm, and swallowed it. She was sweating like crazy beneath her polyester brown slacks and long sleeved white blouse. I could see the moisture dripping down onto her shirt beneath her armpits. I knew the booze would dehydrate her even more.

"Hey Margaret! Do you want a drink?"

"What?"

"I'm going to get a drink. Do you want one?"

"Will there be booze in it?"

"No … just a regular drink … no booze. Do you want one?"

"Well … okay, I'll take one." She turned back toward the game. "Fitzpatrick! You’re a Goddamn idiot!" she screamed. "Put Nuisance in you son-of-a-bitch!"

I wandered out onto the concourse and stumbled around until I found a place that sold soft drinks. I bought two of the biggest lemonade’s I’d ever seen and headed back toward my seat. I stood for a minute at the top of the steps until I finally found Nick in the crowd of players down on the sideline. He was bouncing up and down on his toes, trying to stay ready. His pants were too long and his kneepads dangled almost to his shins. His game-day uniform didn’t fit any better than the one he wore in practice. He was walking around like a caged animal. We were winning by twenty points. Why hadn’t Fitzpatrick put him in? I found my way back to my seat and sat between Margaret and Crasher. Margaret grabbed the lemonade.

“Put Nuisance in you fucking idiot!” she screamed, and then she slugged down half the lemonade in one big gulp.

I stopped caring about the game. I just watched Nick pace around on the sideline until it was all over. I watched him sprint across the field and disappear into the tunnel and the next thing I knew I was walking home with Margaret. I held her right elbow with my left hand. We were both pretty unsteady and I wasn’t sure who was holding up whom. She panted and wheezed in between streams of curses directed at the coaching staff.

"They should have put him in … those bastards!"

“I know.”
“We won by thirty three! They should have given him a chance.” Her voice cracked and she looked away from me and spat on the ground.

“Maybe he’ll play next week.”

“Those fucking bastards! They’ll never let him play,” she said.

“They’ve never seen the likes of him before,” I said. “They just don’t know it yet.”

I held her arm a little tighter as she wavered and almost fell over when we stepped off a curb.

“Brooks.’

“Yes Margaret.”

“I’m afraid they’re gonna kill him.”

“What?”

“I’m afraid they’re all gonna kill him,” she said. “Those sons-of-bitches … his father and that moron coach, and that stupid-ass scholarship. They’re all gonna kill him.”

She scared me a little bit when she said it, but it made me realize that she didn’t care if he played football or not. It made me realize that I didn’t care either. Fitzpatrick may not be able to figure it out, but that wouldn’t change how we felt about him. Both of us knew he was the best … the best there ever was, whether he played or not.

I held tight to her arm and looked straight ahead toward the house.

“Take it easy Margaret,” I said. “We’re almost home.”

18
The Phantom

I looked at the reaction that dehydrohalogenated the alkyl halide to an alkene and water. The alcohol molecule did it. It made perfect sense. After looking at it for a moment I realized you could use any alcohol to dehydrohalogenate any alkyl halide. Midterms were in a few days and I was sure they would ask me to do it. I’d be ready when they did.

Poopsie tapped his pencil on the study table and Roberta Flack sang “Killing Me Softly” on the radio, but I barely noticed. I was on the edge of that oasis called concentration. I was lost in a world of alcohols and alkyl halides. I was letting the time slip by me like water under a bridge as alkyl halides turned into steroid hormones like estrogen and testosterone, and that’s why I didn’t notice the voice in the hallway right away. That’s why I didn’t even notice it when Poopsie got up from his desk and disappeared for a minute or two.
“Brooks!”
I knew there was a voice out there, but it was someplace far away. It was so far away
that I couldn’t quite hear it clearly.

“Come on! Snap out of it!”
I looked up at Poopsie who was looking down at me.

“It’s The Phantom!” he said.
I saw his mouth make the words but it didn’t register.

“What?” I asked.

“It’s The Phantom,” he said again. “He’s been to the third floor.”

Poopsie could barely contain his excitement. He danced up and down like a kid who
needed to pee.

“Who’s The Phantom?” I asked. “What’s that supposed to mean?”
He lifted me out of my chair. “The Phantom has to be seen to be believed. You’d better
come with me and have a look.”

I walked through the door and saw my pledge brothers marching out of their rooms too.
We walked to the end of the hall in a single file and stopped when we saw Moose at the top of
the stairs. He wore jeans and a flannel shirt and he looked intimidating as hell standing in the
doorway with his hands on his hips.

Moose was about six-two and had a body that looked like a gunnysack full of
cantaloupes. He had big round muscles that bulged out from everywhere beneath his clothing.
His butt looked like there were two big cantaloupes under each hip pocket. There were a couple
more cantaloupes stuffed under the shoulder pads of his shirt, and he had slightly smaller
cantaloupes right where his biceps were supposed to be. They stretched the gray and red
flannel fabric tight around his upper arms. Just about everywhere you looked on Moose’s body
there was round hard muscle. Nobody messed with Moose. He was one of the toughest guys in
the house, and the fact that he was the study chairman made it even worse. Everybody froze in
the hallway the moment we saw him.

“It's study hours!” he said as he looked at his watch. “You’re not done for another thirty
minutes.”

“It's The Phantom Moose,” The Faceman said. “He been to the third floor head.”

“The Phantom?” Moose said. “That's different!” He turned around and walked back down
the hall. “Study hours are over for tonight," he shouted. "They've been canceled by The
Phantom.” He looked into each of the rooms as he pulled his tin of tobacco from his hip pocket
and stuffed a pinch of it into his mouth. "The Phantom!" he shouted past the wad in his lower lip.

"The Phantom has struck on the third floor! Everybody out!"

We moved quickly through the doorway and at the end of the hall we turned up the stairs toward the third floor. Nick joined me and he looked just as excited as the rest of us.

"Who's The Phantom?" I asked, and he answered me as we sprinted up the last few steps two at a time.

"It's a mystery," he said. "It's always been a mystery."

"How do you know when he comes?" I was huffing and puffing trying to keep up with him.

"It's pretty obvious … you'll see."

There was a line forming outside the door of the third floor head in the new section. The guys in the back were standing on their tiptoes trying to look over the shoulders of the guys in front of them. A few of the members were walking past us on their way out. They all shook their heads in amazement as they passed us.

"It happens just a few times a year," Nick said. He'd pushed me into the line in front of him. "Nobody knows who The Phantom is, but I think it's one of the upper classmen. He struck three times last year, and I heard he struck two times the year before that, so it has to be a junior or a senior."

"Shit Nick!" The Faceman said. He stood in line right behind us. "The Phantom was here when my brother was in the house. Some people think it's an alumni who sneaks in a few times a year."

"Maybe it's inherited." Booby said from the back of the line. "Maybe it's passed on from one guy to another … maybe there's different guys from the same family in the house at different times."

Nick and The Faceman looked back at Booby as if he were nuts.

"I'm not saying it's my family," Booby said. "I swear to God it's not my family."

"Yeah sure," Big Wally said. He stood right behind Booby.

"I think we should put Booby under surveillance," Dudley said. He stood in line right behind Big Wally.

"What did you say Dudley?" The Faceman asked.

"What about Margaret?" Nick said.

“What?” The Faceman looked incredulous.

"Well … she's lived here longer than anybody else. Maybe she's The Phantom."
"Jesus!" The Faceman said. "Nothing like that could come out of Margaret. I mean, it would be anatomically impossible!"

"Maybe the phantom doesn't have to be big," Booby said. "Maybe the phantom is a little guy. Maybe he does it by magic, like a leprechaun."

To my surprise there was agreement among some of the people in the line. I saw Poopsie nodding his head up and down as if he believed it was a viable theory.

"The idea has merit," Dudley said. "No one is immune from suspicion."

"What did he say?" The Faceman asked again.

We entered the head as the group in front of us filed out. We clustered around the toilet bowl, and there was an eerie moment of silence as we all looked in.

It was my first experience. The others had seen it before, or at least a similar version of it, so they might have been a little more prepared for it than I was, but still … I didn't expect what I found in there. It was absolutely the biggest turd I'd ever seen. It was the biggest turd I could even imagine. It was a huge log that was textured brown and as big around as the hole in the bottom of the toilet. As a matter of fact one end of the turd was jammed into the hole, and it disappeared from site like a huge fat snake. The other end jutted up out of the water and pointed directly at us.

"Gargantuan effort!" The Faceman said. The tone of awe in his voice echoed all of our feelings. "It's the biggest turd I've ever seen."

"The Phantom ... Jesus!" Big Wally said as he looked down into the toilet bowel with his hands in his pockets, being careful not to get too close.

"This turd is perfectly formed," I said, as I looked at the part sticking up out of the water. "It's almost too perfectly formed if you ask me, and I don't think it stinks as much as it should, at least not for a turd that size."

There was a solemn state of silence as they looked at me. The implications were as gargantuan as the turd itself. After all, this was The Phantom I was talking about.

"What do you mean?" Nick asked.

"It smells in here, but it doesn't smell any different than the other heads. It's just normal bathroom smells."

I leaned over, being careful not to get too close and carefully sniffed.

"I would expect a turd like that to really stink up the place," I said.

The others leaned forward too and examined the turd with me.
"I wonder if it’s made out of meatloaf," I said, more to myself than anyone else, but as soon as I said it the room became quiet as a tomb. We all looked at the turd in silence and contemplated the possibilities. The dripping of the faucet was the only sound.

"Jesus," The Faceman finally said, breaking the silence. He seemed to understand the implications of what I was saying. "The recipe could be passed from one generation to the next, and the phantom would never die."

"Excremental immortality," Dudley said.

"What did you say Dudley?" The Faceman asked.

"Maybe we should analyze it?" Big Wally said. "Maybe we should take it out of there and check it out … see if it really is a turd."

We all looked at each other, waiting for someone to budge.

"What if it isn’t meatloaf?" Booby asked. He’d been silent up to now, staring down at the turd as if it were one of the natural wonders of the world. "What if it’s really a turd?"

"I'm thinking we should just assume its meatloaf," Nick said, and the rest of us nodded our heads in agreement.

"I think this puts Cougar under investigation," The Faceman said. "The house steward is the only guy who can get that much meatloaf. He could pass the recipe on each year to the next house steward. It’s the perfect cover."

"It could be Margaret too," I said. "She’s been here for a long time. She could strike a couple of times each year. She could get her hands on meatloaf too … plenty of it."

"Do you mean that after all these years we might finally catch The Phantom?" Booby asked.

"I told you," Nick said to the others. "I told you that Brooks was smart."

"Cougar and Margaret," The Faceman said. "We’ll have to put them both under surveillance."

"They won’t be easy to catch," Poopsie warned. "They’ve been at this for a long time … if they’re the ones. Whoever it is they’re real pros, they’ve escaped capture for all these years. Maybe Cougar and Margaret are in on it together."

"Hurry up!"

It was Crasher. He was with another group of guys behind us who were waiting to take a look.

"You’ve been long enough. We want a look."

"Hold on!" Nick said.
“I think we should keep this between ourselves,” he continued. “We’ll be famous if we find The Phantom. We’ll be remembered forever.”

We made a pact of secrecy before we walked away from the turd and let Crasher’s group have a look. I walked out of the head and back toward the world of alcohol’s and alkyl halides. Nick walked with me down the stairs and we went through the old section doorway together and walked down the hallway past Zeke’s silent stereo.

“I knew you were smart,” he said. “But I didn’t think anybody would ever catch The Phantom. This is the best lead we’ve ever had, and we owe it all to you. I’ll bet it’s been meatloaf all along.”

“Maybe … it’s just a guess.”

“Don’t be so modest.”

“It isn’t so much is it?” I asked. “All I did was figure out the difference between a turd and a wad of meatloaf. You act like I’m a genius.”

Nick ignored me and moved ahead to the next step in the thought process.

“If we catch The Phantom we’ll be famous,” he said.

He followed me into my room and flopped down on Poopsie’s chair. He put his feet up on the desk and looked out the window. I was glad he’d come in. I felt like the alcohols could wait another few minutes to get dehydrohalogenated into more alkyl halides.

“Are you still seeing her?” I asked.

“Who?”

“You know who I mean. The girl at the water fight, the one with the big white teeth and the dark skin and the legs that went all the way up to her... up to her....”

“Her butt?”

“Yes ... all the way up to her butt.” I said. “She has the longest legs I’ve ever seen. I’d like to see a little more of her.”

“I bet you would,” he said. He knew I was getting sidetracked with the girls/sex problem again.

“Do you still see her in class?” I asked. “When is she coming over again?”

“I see her every day in class and I don’t know if I’ll bring her back or not,” he said.

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t trust some of these guys, especially The Faceman.”

“The Faceman’s a clown,” I said, as I fiddled with the corner of the page on my chemistry book. “You only say that because you like her. You do don’t you?”
“Yeah I like her,” he replied, as he pulled at a stray thread sticking out of the hem on his shirt. The thread had unraveled an inch so he bit it in half with his teeth.

“What’s she like?” I asked.

He spit the thread out onto the carpet.

“She’s different than most girls. She doesn’t let anybody get too close too fast. I’m still trying to figure her out.”

“Have you screwed her yet?” I asked. Not certain that I wanted to hear the answer.

He looked at me and shook his head and said: “Not even close.”

It wasn’t very often that he didn’t have his way with a girl. For some reason I was glad he hadn’t. He looked out the window over the tops of his tennis shoes and searched again for the stray thread on his sleeve. I knew he wasn’t finished so I just waited for him to tell me the rest.

“She lives in a little house off-campus with her aunt. I walked her home once after class and she showed me the house but she wouldn’t let me come inside because her aunt wasn’t there. I didn’t make a big deal out of it, but she acted almost afraid to let me inside.”

“Maybe she’s just smart.”

“Yeah maybe … but there’s more to it than that. I just haven’t figured it out yet.”

“Where’s she from?” I asked. I wanted to keep him talking about her. I wanted to know everything about her.

“She's from the city,” he said. “But she won’t talk much about that either. She doesn’t say much about her mother or father or anything from the past.”

“That’s too bad,” I said. I was just doing my part to keep the conversation going. I knew he wasn’t finished.

“I wonder sometimes if she’s been hurt,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“Sometimes I get the feeling she’s working her way out of a bad situation. I’ve never seen anybody work so hard in school. She doesn’t want to go back to whatever she left in the city.”

I didn’t ask him how he knew all that stuff. He didn’t always know himself, but he was always right about it. We sat for a few more minutes without saying a word. Nick was just about the only guy in the world I could sit around with and not worry about saying anything if I didn’t feel like it. I waited to make sure he didn’t have anything else to say before I asked him about something else.

“How’s your economics class?” I asked.

“I’m not taking economics.”
“But Margaret said you were.”
“Don’t pay any attention to her … she’s not always right.”
“Most the time she is.”
“Yeah … most of the time.”
“Did you flunk it … like she said?”
“I missed the final and I flunked the course last year, but I can take it again next semester.”
“I could help you if you wanted. We could take the course together and I could study with you.”
“Why would you want to take economics?”
“I wouldn’t mind … if it would help.”
“You don’t need to spend your time taking economics.”

He looked back out the window. He kept his hands behind his head and wiggled his feet ever so slightly. “It’s nice of you to offer though,” he said, “but you need to take care of your own business. You don’t need to be taking economics.”

I waited. This was usually the time in the conversation when he came up with one of his parables. He liked making me wait. He sat there and looked out the window and wiggled his feet back and forth for about a minute or so before he said anything else.

“You’re lucky,” he said finally.
“Why is that?”
“Because there are so many things you’re good at.”
“Look who’s talking.”
“I’m serious. You have to take advantage of the things you’re good at. I expect a lot from you.”

“What do you expect from me?”
“I expect you to cure cancer or write a book or be one of those guys on TV with the little sticks that conducts the orchestra. What are they called?”
“The Maestro.”
“Yeah … the Maestro.”
“You’re starting to sound like my dad,” I said.
“Somebody’s got to take care of you while you’re at school.”
“What’s all this got to do with me wanting to help?” I asked him.
“If you really want to help why don’t you just take my tests for me? You don’t need to take the class. You can just show up and pass the course by taking my tests.”

I didn’t say anything. I wondered for an instant if he meant it, but his smile betrayed him.

“I don’t need any help,” he said finally. “I’ll get by. But you’ve got other things to do … there are lots of other things for you to worry about. You don’t need me getting in the way.”

I felt my skin flush hot when I realized that he might have taken offense.

“I didn’t mean it that way,” I said.

“I know you didn’t,” he said. He took his feet off of Poopsie’s desk and stood up and looked down at my textbook. “You’d better get back to work on this … whatever it is. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He turned to leave but stopped at the sound of my voice.

“Nick.”

“What?”

“Where did she come from?”

I knew she was from no single place. She was darker than we were, but not black. She had light cocoa-colored skin and eyes that looked almost like almonds with black pits and a body like the pictures of dancers I’d seen in books. Every part of her was so exquisite I was certain she was from a race I was not familiar with. She was from a super-race as near as I could tell.

“I don’t know,” he said. “She said her mother and father met in the Pacific during the war. Like I said. She doesn’t talk much about either of them.”

I waited for a little while to make sure he didn’t have anything else to say. I imagined her emerging out of a melting pot of South Pacific and American races … all of the best ingredients from all of the best races coming together and mixing around to make her.

“Nick?”

“What?”

“It doesn’t matter to me.”

“What doesn’t matter?”

“It doesn’t matter to me where she’s from or what color she is.”

He looked back at the sleeve of his shirt. A part of the thread still dangled there so he grabbed it and snapped it off between his fingers.

“It doesn’t matter to me either,” he said. “But I’m sure there are plenty of people who feel differently than you do. Maybe that’s why she’s a little hard to get to know.”
I watched him walk out of the door and disappear down the hallway. For a big guy he had a way of disappearing fast. He'd always been like that.

In our little town everybody looked the same. We were as monotonous in our color as we were in our politics. I liked the fact that Leslie was different than I was. In fact I welcomed the difference. I hoped that I'd be able to see her again, and for some reason I liked it that Nick hadn't been able to coax her into bed yet. There was something special about her. It wasn't just the way she looked that made my stomach feel light every time I thought about her. I didn't know what it was, and it sounded like he didn't know either.

I decided not to worry about Nick's economics class. If he were having problems he'd tell me. But just the same ... if he'd wanted me to take his tests I would have done it. Even though it was wrong, I'd have done whatever he asked. That's just the way it was. It's the way it had always been between Nick and me.

19
Testing Potatoes

I looked at the stainless steel blades churning around in circles at the bottom of the mixing bowl. Each one looked as big as a tennis racket. They gleamed as they danced beneath the bright lights directly over my head.

My pledge brothers dashed in and out of the kitchen carrying silverware and plates while Margaret worked furiously at the grill amid the confusion. The chicken fried steaks sizzled and popped as she turned them over and then smashed them down into the hot metal with her big spatula. Every now and then she scooped one up and flipped it onto a growing pile of grilled meat in the warming oven.

"Cougar!" She barked, "We're just about done with the steaks. Are the potatoes ready?"
"We're working on it!" Cougar shouted back.

He was putting handfuls of salad on small plastic plates. The lettuce was already mixed up with little shreds of carrots and cabbage and Cougar used both hands to place it on the plates; right hand followed left hand in rapid succession. The pledges that worked dinner crew were grabbing the plates four at a time and raced through the dining room doors to place them on the tables.

"Hurry up!" Margaret shouted back at Cougar. "The potatoes should be done by now."
I turned the switch on low and watched the big round blades slow down. I poured more of the instant potato mix into the bowl and then wondered if I'd added too much. I hit the off button and lifted the blades out of the goo, grabbing the water pitcher on the counter at the same time. I had no idea what I was doing. I lowered the mixing blade into the bowl at the same time I poured the water in and watched the blades mix the white flakes again. Cougar dashed by and looked at my creation.

"Here!" he said, as he snatched the potato mix from my hands. "You'll need at least this much." He dumped the dehydrated potatoes in until the bowl was two thirds full and then he turned the mixer on high. "Add more hot water," he said, and the next thing I knew he was gone.

I added the water and watched the flakes turn sticky as they started to absorb the water. Not enough, I thought, so I added more water and waited as the blades mixed the goo together until it didn't stick anymore. I let it mix for another minute before I had to admit it was too thin. I added more potato mix and watched it thicken up again.

"Hey Cougar!" I shouted. "How do I know when the potatoes are just right?"
He raced over and looked into the bowl.
"You can just look at 'em," he said. "Or you can taste 'em."
He dipped his finger into the bowl and placed a blob of potato mix into his mouth. A little bit of it stuck to the thick black whiskers above his lip.
"But there's only one way to know for sure," he said finally.
"How's that?" I asked.
He took the bowl of potatoes off the mixer.
"Margaret!" He shouted above the clatter in the kitchen. "I need to teach Brooks how to test the potatoes!"
Margaret didn't even look up from the grill. The ash on her cigarette bounced up and down as she spoke. "Okay!" she shouted. "But hurry up. I'm almost done with the steaks."
Cougar reached into a drawer and pulled out a big wooden spoon.
"Follow me," he said. "And I'll show you how to test the potatoes."
I followed him to the landing dock in the alley behind the kitchen. He was quite a site, wearing a big white cotton apron over a pair of gym trunks with black high-top tennis shoes. He cradled the stainless steel bowl of potatoes in his left arm and pointed at me with the wooden spoon.
"Pay close attention," he said.
He turned toward the Sigma Phi house and I followed his gaze toward a painted blue wall. Cougar took a spoonful of potatoes and reared back on his right foot. He stepped up and the potato mix catapulted from the end of the spoon as he snapped his wrist forward. The blob of instant potatoes hurtled through the air, maintaining its mass without breaking up. It arched across the alley, and landed with a thud on the wall of the Sigma Phi house between two of the windows. Cougar watched the blob of instant potato stick to the wall and counted quietly to himself.

“One thousand one ... one thousand two ... one thousand three,” he said.

The potato mix clung to the sideboards of the Sigma Phi house like a thick white jellyfish. When Cougar reached three I could see it start to slide off, and before he got to four it let go and dropped silently through the air until it landed with a splat in the alley. Cougar cocked his head to the side and smiled. He looked happy with the result.

“You see,” he said. “If the potatoes are too thin they break up and splatter on the wall. They don’t fall off at all. They just stay there until they dry out and wash off in the rain. If they’re too thick, they hold together fine when they fly through the air, but they bounce off the wall.” He looked down as he scooped out another spoonful. “At the Sigma Tau House we want potatoes that stick to the wall for three seconds before they fall off.” He handed me the spoon filled with potatoes and said: “Now you try it.”

I took the spoon and leaned back on my right foot just like Cougar had. I stepped up and swung my arm forward and I could feel the weight at the end of the spoon cut loose as the potatoes took off and flew across the alley in a perfect arch. I wondered for a moment if the white blob might hit one of the windows. I wondered about the sticking properties of glass, and how that might affect the test. But the potatoes landed on the wall right next to one of the windows and clung there as we counted.

“One thousand one ... one thousand two ... one thousand three, one thousand four ...” and then the blob tumbled to the asphalt of the alley.

“Nice job,” Cougar said. “The potatoes are perfect.”

For the first time I looked closely at the walls of the Sigma Phi house. There were small patches of white scattered about on the blue paint like polka dots on a shirt. They were the failed results of the “potato test.” They were potatoes that were too thin and stuck to the wall until they dried out; the faint white dots would cling to the blue paint until the winter storms washed them free.

We barely made it back to the kitchen before Margaret started yelling at us.
"How are the potatoes!" she asked.
"Three seconds!" Cougar shouted back.

"Perfect!" She responded. "Let's get them dished up, we're two minutes late."

She reached into the oven with her oven mitt and extracted the huge pan of chicken-fried steaks. She plopped them on the big stainless steel counter right next to the potatoes just as Cougar pulled a pot of mixed vegetables off the stove. Margaret stood behind the counter and grabbed a plastic dinner plate from the stack on her left. She speared a steak with her fork and put it on the plate. She expertly scooped out one seventy-fifth of the potatoes from the mixing bowl and plopped them onto the plate as she handed it to her right.

Cougar gouged out a half circle in the potatoes with his ladle as he grabbed the plate, and then he filled the space with gravy. A small amount of it ran over the edges onto the plate, touching the sides of the steak. Then he put the mixed vegetables in the far corner and slid it toward the end of the stainless steel counter where six pledges waited all in a row.

I stood in line right behind Herbie and we all marveled at how fast Margaret and Cougar moved. The plates flew across the counter one after another. Each one looked exactly the same as they came sliding toward us. Each pledge took two plates and dashed through the swinging doors toward the dining room. Each of us placed the food on a table and then ran back through the opposite door only to be greeted by another set of plates sliding down the stainless steel counter. All of us ran in circles as Margaret and Cougar dished up the plates. In four minutes the hot food had been transferred to the tables, and Cougar was walking toward the double doors between the dining room and the living room carrying the dinner chimes. He opened the doors to a line of members that ran down the length of the living room. He played the chimes, and turned back through the dining room doors and the crowd marched in after him. They all stood behind their chairs until Pursell tapped his water glass with his spoon. Then we all sang together.

For the fruits of the earth
And for all other ... blessings
Dear Lord
We thank thee

I started scooping the food off my plate and shoveling it into my mouth as fast as I could. I knew the dinner bells would start ringing soon, and I wanted to eat as much as I could before I got side-tracked running all over the place chasing down the whims of the member’s appetites.
The dinner bells were the worst part of being on the dinner crew. Every table had eight guys and it’s own little silver bell that rested at the end of the table nearest the kitchen. Every time somebody at one of the tables wanted something, all they had to do was ring the bell and one of us would come racing out of the kitchen and grant them whatever they wanted. They were slave-bells for the freshmen working on dinner crew. Once they started ringing they usually didn’t stop until dinner was all over and the food on your own plate was cold. I’d gotten most of the potatoes and half the chicken fried steak into my mouth before the first bell rang.

I walked into the dining room and saw Pursell holding a salad dressing bowl up over his head. That meant it was empty and he wanted more. I took the bowl and started back toward the kitchen but stopped when I heard The Faceman talking to Nick at a different table.

“Who’s the girl I saw you with up on the hill today?” he asked.

Nick, Crasher, and Big Wally sat opposite The Faceman.

“Why would you care Face?”

“Because she’s too hot for you,” The Faceman responded. “Where’d you find her anyway? A girl like that should be going to the pledge dance with somebody like me”

“You told me you were going with Ashleigh Pierce,” Big Wally said. He had somehow managed to eat and talk and grin all at the same time. “Don’t bullshit us Faceman.”

“That’s a nickel Wally!” Moose said. He was at the head of the table. It was his job to levy the fines when there was a breach of etiquette, usually because somebody cursed.

Big Wally reached into his pocket and extracted a nickel. He placed it into a Styrofoam cup next to Moose. I looked into the cup over Moose’s shoulder to make sure there was no tobacco juice in it. I wondered again if Margaret spent the money on booze. I also wondered if I’d ever be able to find anybody to go to the pledge dance with me. It seemed like that was all anybody wanted to talk about.”

“You’re too late Faceman,” Nick said. “She’s going to the dance with me.”

My heart skipped a beat when I heard him say it. Now that I knew she would be there, I’d have to find a date for the dance.

“Have you had any of that yet Nick?” The Faceman asked. “You know what they say about dark-skinned girls.”

I almost dropped the salad dressing bowl.

“Fuck you Faceman!” I said.

Everybody turned around to look at me. Until that moment nobody even knew I was there.

“That’s a nickel Brooks,” Moose said.
I looked for a place to put the bowl so I could reach into my jeans and get the nickel, but Nick beat me to it and placed the coin into the cup. It clinked on top of Big Wally’s. I could see a blush of red on the back of Nick’s neck from where I stood behind him. I wondered for an instant if he might just get up and knock the shit out of The Faceman for making the wise crack, but he stayed cool.

“What’s her name?” The Faceman persisted.

“If you’re nice I’ll introduce you,” Nick said. “But that’s as close as you’ll ever get.”

“Hey Brooks!”

I turned to look at Pursell who was pointing his thumb toward the kitchen door.

“Hurry up with the salad dressing,” he said.

“Shit!” I said under my breath.

“That’s another nickel Brooks.”

Moose pointed toward the cup again but Nick reached across the table and dropped another nickel in.

“You’d better get going,” he said. “This is getting expensive.”

“Thanks Nick.”

I moved into the kitchen and filled the bowl as fast as I could. My dinner had gotten cold but I stuffed a couple more bites of chicken fried steak into my mouth before going out again. I scooped up the rest of the potatoes too and packed them in with the meat. The food made a lumpy-cold slurry inside my mouth. I walked past Nick’s table and heard The Faceman talking about last year’s pledge dance. I swallowed the cold meat and potatoes and vowed I’d find a date one way or another.

There had to be a girl someplace on campus who would go to the dance with me. If I could pull it off maybe I’d get a chance to see Leslie again. Maybe I’d be able to steal a few minutes of conversation and learn more about her. I wondered if she’d look as good the second time around as she had the first. I wondered if she’d make me feel the same way that she did the first time I saw her.

“Hey Brooks,” Pursell said. “Where are you anyway? In dreamland?”

“Yeah,” I answered. “I guess so.”

“Well sleepwalk over here with the salad dressing will you. My lettuce is starting to wilt.”

I headed toward Pursell’s table determined to find a date to the pledge dance.
Mid-Terms

All the faces looked the same. They were pale, and strained, and they looked as if they were just a few seconds short of loosing their lunch. Pencils twitched back and forth in trembling fingers, and people squirmed in their chairs as they searched for a position they were comfortable with. The conversations were in short clipped sentences that made each person sound short of breath.

I walked past all of them and sat in the front row with nothing but my number two pencil and a slide rule. I could already feel the relaxation that was a part of being close to the zone. Everything was loosening up and my mind felt clear and focused for the first time all day. I wanted to get started. I needed the exam to nudge me over.

The test came down my row and I watched the heads drop as each person received the sheets of paper. By the time they reached me I’d already crossed over.

The alkenes, alcohols, and ethers started swimming around on the page. They mixed and matched and combined and broke apart effortlessly. It was a beautiful thing. It was the only time I felt strong. My pencil moved across the pages without interruption, each question providing just the amount of stimulus that I needed to stay in this place and enjoy the time distortion and concentration. Without the concentration I’d lose the sense of power. Without the power I’d slip out of the zone and feel weak. But in here I only felt strength.

Music made me feel the same way. It had a way of making all of the uncertainties in life disappear. Maybe it wasn’t really the music that I loved. Maybe it was just the power I felt when I played it. I didn’t know where all of this stuff would lead, but the sensation was like dope. I’d keep coming back for more until it took me somewhere. All I could do was enjoy the ride.

I used the alcohol to dehydrohalogenate the alkyl halide to an alkene and water. I turned the page and looked for more. I needed more. I needed more fuel to burn the fire of concentration. Without the fuel I’d lose everything.

The next page was blank and I felt my heart sink. It made my whole body feel heavy as lead ... it always did. I looked up from the paper and felt myself drift back from the zone. Time returned to its normal pace and for the first time I noticed the coughs and snifflies coming from the guy sitting next to me. He had a cold and he was making a racket wheezing and hacking up
goobers every thirty seconds or so. In the zone there had only been silence. There was no room for noisy stuffed-up guys with colds in the zone. There was only warm, thick, peaceful silence.

I stood up and walked down the center isle of the lecture hall. I put the paper on the professor’s empty desk and walked out of the building without looking back. I made it a point never to look back.

There was an empty bench in the middle of the campus right next to the library. The sky was deep blue and the clouds in it were puffy and white and motionless. There was music drifting out the windows of the old music hall right next door.

I couldn’t let myself get cocky. After all, it wasn’t all that special. It was just the way it was, the way it had always been. It hadn’t meant anything up to this point, and it probably wouldn’t change much of anything. If it were so great, it would have at least gotten me some attention from the opposite sex. If it were so great, it would have at least gotten me laid.

For the first time I wondered if things might be different in college. Maybe all of this stuff would make a difference here. Maybe I’d find some strength and confidence for the first time in my life.

I stood up and walked down the hill toward the Kappa Pi Beta house. There was a redhead that lived there, and I needed a date to the pledge dance.

21
Pledge Dance

I sat with Mitchell and four other pledge brothers in Zeke's room on the second floor of the old section. We had our dates with us too, so there were twelve people in a room barely big enough for two. The stereo blasted out the doorway carrying the sound down the hallway where it mixed together with the music coming from the sleeping porch upstairs. Tower of Power and BTO tumbled together out there in a bundle of rhythm and blues. Mitchell took a drink of his rum and coke and with his right hand he reached out and tried to touch the shoulder of the girl he was with. He was off by about six inches and he missed her shoulder and ended up tottering over and ramming his nose into the back of her neck. She tried to move even farther away from him, but she couldn’t get very far. We were crammed into the room like a bunch of sardines in a can.

Booby had set Mitchell up with a freshman pledge he knew from his hometown. Mitchell didn’t even know what she looked like when he went to pick her up, and she didn’t know any
better than to take a blind date to a pledge dance with a fraternity guy she’d never met. Now that she was here she didn’t seem too impressed with our pledge dance, and she was even less impressed with Mitchell. As the room became louder and we became less inhibited she seemed to get even more skillful at dodging his clumsy hands.

Mitchell’s enthusiasm, on the other hand, was increasing right along with the volume of rum and coke he drank. When we picked her up he’d said she didn’t look all that great. After the pre-function and a couple of drinks he’d announced that she wasn’t so bad after all. And by the time we’d had a couple more rum and cokes, Mitchell was convinced she looked just like Olivia Newton-John. I could feel the effects of the four drinks I’d had, and Mitchell was up to seven or eight at least. I wondered how much more he could take as I watched him spill his drink on her right knee. She wiggled a few inches further away from him. He looked over at me and grinned.

“Olivia!” he mumbled as he pointed his thumb toward the back of her head and winked.

I smiled and gave him a “thumbs up.” Cowgirl and I hadn’t been upstairs to the dance floor yet and I was starting to wonder if Mitchell would ever even make it.

“Let's go upstairs,” Cowgirl shouted. "I want to dance." The music was nearly drowning out her voice.

Her face was about three inches from mine and I could smell the booze on her breath. Her green eyes were crystal clear and they danced in front of mine like sparks from a pinwheel. Unlike Mitchell, Cowgirl seemed unaffected by the rum and coke. She’d had at least as many as me, but she acted like she’d been drinking Kool-Aid.

“Hey Mitchell!” I shouted. “Let’s go upstairs and dance!”

“In a little bit,” he shouted back. His speech was getting pretty slurred. “After I finish my rum and coke.”

He reached out with his left hand toward his date again, but she skillfully turned sideways and he missed. He recovered his balance and took another drink. Cowgirl and I stood up and left. She was holding my right arm and I could feel her energy run right through me. She felt like a thousand little springs bouncing around all at once.

“See you upstairs Mitchell.”

“Sure Brooks!” he said. “Upstairs!” He rocked his head back and took another drink. “Come on!” Cowgirl said as she pulled me out of the room. “Mitchell’s on his own.”

I took one last look into the room and heard him mumble something about Olivia Newton-John again before Cowgirl and I took the new section stairs up to the sleeping porch. The place was barely recognizable.
There were thick extension cords that ran across the floor like big black snakes from the outlets to the amplifiers. The bunk beds were crammed into the northwest corner, where sharp metallic corners with gleaming silver springs peeked out from behind painted sheets of butcher paper. Half the streamers that had been hung from the ceiling were already on the floor and they drifted around in the currents generated by the dancers. The sound erupted from the end of the sleeping porch and bodies sweated and writhed and brushed up against each other in front of the speakers. Wet fabric stuck to hard nipples that jutted out through tight shirts toward admiring eyes. Through various states of altered consciousness every guy in the room wondered if this was his lucky night.

I saw Woody dancing right next to the band. The music was loudest there, and louder is always better when you're listening to BTO. The girl he was dancing with wore a short white cotton shirt and bell-bottomed jeans. Her belly button moved back and forth with the music below the bottom of her T-shirt, and from where I stood I could see the smooth skin of her hips just above her belt glisten with the slightest bit of sweat. She had long brown hair that flew straight out from her head when she spun around on the dance floor. She had perfect hand-sized tits too, and they were trapped close to her chest in a real tight white shirt without a bra. As I watched her and grappled with the girls/sex issue all over again she wrapped her arms around Woody’s neck and stuck her tongue down his throat. I wondered if she knew about Python. I suspected she did. Everybody on campus seemed to know about Python. A legend like that didn’t stop at the doors of the Sigma Tau house. Most of the girls on campus probably knew about Python. This girl sure acted like she did.

"Things are looking good for Woody tonight!" Big Wally shouted as he bumped into Cowgirl and me.

His date tucked her hair behind her ear. "What did you say Wally?" she asked.

"I said you're looking good tonight!"

She smiled and moved closer to him. "Thanks Wally," she said.

He grinned with that big shit-eating grin of his and I realized it was the first time I'd ever seen him with a girl. It never occurred to me that a guy like Wally could find a date. But he did … and a good one too.

Cowgirl started to dance and I felt like a spectator at a demonstration on kinetic energy. She moved around in every direction at once. Her white teeth gleamed out from beneath her red hair and green eyes. Each arm and leg seemed to dance to it's own tune as she moved. Sometimes she’d just slam right into me and grab me by the shoulders and spin the two of us
around. I liked the feel of her when she got close. She was tough and wiry and firm all over. She felt like a sexy electric cable. Through the light fog of the rum and coke I wondered what she would feel like naked and in bed. I wondered what any girl would feel like naked and in bed, but at this particular time I wondered what Cowgirl would feel like. It seemed to me that she would have to feel different than just about anybody else in the world.

While I was watching her dance she suddenly lunged toward me and grabbed me by the shoulders. I saw her face in front of mine ... bright white teeth and green eyes surrounded by red. She kissed me hard on the lips and I reached for her waist but she slipped away.

“What was that for?” I asked.

She moved back up into my face and shook me again by the shoulders. "Are you kidding!" she shouted. "It's for the party! This is a great party!" She gave me a shove, and punched me on the shoulder. "Let's dance!" she said.

I watched in wonder as she resumed her dyskinetic dancing. I tried to move closer to her but one of her elbows whizzed past my forehead and I thought it safer to back up another step.

In the middle of the dance floor Leslie was dancing with Nick. She wore pressed white slacks and a white cotton blouse with an open collar. She had on a pair of brown penny loafers without socks. Her skin almost matched the color of the leather, and her dark hair stood out against her white shirt. I felt the breath get squeezed right out of my lungs the second I saw her. She looked even better than she had the first time.

Nick had on a pair of jeans and a short-sleeved golf shirt that didn't have enough room for the muscles in his arms ... none of his shirts did. He danced like he did everything else, without much effort at all. He pulled her close and put his hands on her hips. She reached up and put her arms around his neck and they kissed and I couldn't help but wonder what she tasted like.

Woody had worked his way over beside us. He was dancing right in front of the amplifiers and he was working his way into some pretty wild gyrations. His arms and legs flew away to the sound of the music and he moved faster and faster until all of a sudden he leaped into the air and landed on the floor and started squirming around as if he were having an epileptic fit. He squirmed on his belly and then on his back, his arms and legs shooting out with uncontrollable energy. Then Big Wally yelled "Gator!" and jumped on top of Woody.

Now there were two of them wiggling and squirming around on the floor. First Big Wally on top ... then Woody. They writhed and rolled around until Poopsie jumped in and then there were three. Cowgirl and I moved over to the edge of a circle that was forming around them and I
watched in amazement as Booby and Crasher jumped in. Now there were five guys on the floor
and they squirmed and flip-flopped around in a bundle of wiggling arms and legs.

"What are they doing?" I asked Cowgirl.

"They're gatoring!" she said. She stood right behind me and watched over my shoulder.

"Why don't you try it?"

"I've never seen it before."

"How much do you need to see?" she asked.

I knew the excuse was lame. It wasn't like I needed lessons. I didn't notice her hand in the
middle of my back.

"It's easy," she said. "All you do is get down on the floor, and wiggle around like an
alligator."

I felt her push me hard as she spoke and the next thing I knew I tripped on somebody's
leg and fell flat on my face. I felt like I'd landed in a great big washing machine.

There was movement back and forth and up and down all at the same time. There was
also pain in every part of my body at once. I tried to get up, but fell down again when Big Wally
rolled over onto the back of my legs. I felt somebody kick me in the back of the head and I rolled
over onto my stomach and looked into Crashers face. He was squirming around on his stomach
too, and our faces were just inches apart. His glasses had been knocked sideways on his head
and one of the earpieces clung to his nose. He squinted at me, and then his thin lips formed a
smile of recognition. It was the first time I'd seen his eyes without the thick pieces of glass in
front of them. They looked smaller, and he looked as though he wanted to say something, but
just as his lips parted his face disappeared as if some invisible force had pulled him away.

I was lost in a sea of arms and legs and couldn't hear the music anymore. I rolled over
and over, turning and twisting as the power of the group pulled me along with it. I felt elbows,
knees, and feet jabbing from all directions. Something smacked me hard on the side of the head,
and for a few seconds I saw stars and didn't know where I was. Then something pulled on my
leg and I slid across the floor as if propelled by a jet engine. Strong hands grabbed me and I
came up into the smiling face of Nick, who shook me like a rag doll.

"Are you all right?" he asked me. He waited for a second before he asked again. "Are you
all right? You have to be careful in there."

"Yeah ... sure ... I think so." The side of my head throbbed, but I felt good ... in fact I was
ready for more.
"Don’t get hurt," he said. "I want you to play with the band tonight. I’ve already talked to them about it."
"What?" I asked. My head was starting to clear up, but I didn’t think I’d heard him right.
"I want you to play with the band tonight," he repeated.
"You want me to play?"
"Yes."
"I can’t," I said. I forgot all about the lump growing on the side of my head. "I’ve never been in a band before."
"You can play a song or two," he said. "Nobody will remember anything in the morning anyway."
Cowgirl punched me on the shoulder.
"Go ahead and do it!" she said.
I started to protest again until I heard Leslie’s voice. She was standing right next to Nick. She spoke to me in that low-pitched voice of hers that I remembered so well from the front yard right after the water fight. The sound of her voice made me forget everything else.
"I’d like to hear you play," she said.
"Sure," I said. “Okay … I’ll play.”
The words came out of my mouth without me even thinking about it. Nick slapped me on the back and shoved me toward the amplifiers and the next thing I knew I was standing next to the guys in the band. They were all looking at me like I was just another fraternity drunk who wanted to be a rock star … which I guess I was.
"We’re almost done with the set," the guitar player said. He looked tired and bored. "Nick says you can play, but you’ve only got one song. Can you keep up?"
My mind went blank. Cowgirl was bouncing around out in front of the amplifiers. She put her fingers in her mouth and whistled.
"Can you keep up with us?" He asked me again.
My heart was pounding in my chest. I wanted another rum and coke.
"I can handle it," I said.
"Okay," he said.
He told me the name of the song and the key they wanted to play it in and then he shoved me up behind the keyboards and just like that we started. Everybody on the dance floor started moving again.
Got those highway blues can't you hear the motor runnin'  
Drivin' down the road with my foot on the floor

The feel of the keys and the sound of the music got the better of my fear ... and the rum and coke didn’t hurt either. I sang the chorus with the rest of the guys.

Can't stop, no I can't stop  
Gotta keep movin' or I'll lose my mind (1)

Zeke, Trapper, and Big Wally started jumping around and Crasher rocked his head back and howled. By the time we’d finished the chorus the whole room was shaking. Woody’s date was jumping into the air, and her white cotton T-shirt flew up each time she came back to earth. Woody grabbed her waist and pulled her toward him. He spun her around twice and then let her go and dove for the floor. He stood on his hands for an instant and his legs moved around like a windmill and then he collapsed onto the linoleum to the delight of everyone. I heard Poopsie yell "Gator" and then everybody else jumped in.

The exhilaration worked its way through the booze and the nerves and it felt good. The sleeping porch was shaking by the time we finished the song and before I could get off the stage they pulled me back on.

“Where’d you learn to sing and play like that?” one guy asked.
“Like what?”
“Like a Goddamn music machine!”
“I'm a music machine?”
“No shit!”
“Really?”
“Fuckin' A!”
“How about a slow song? Do you know any slow songs?”
“I guess so,” I said.
“What do you want to sing?”
“What do I want to sing?”
“This one’s yours.”
I looked over the top of the microphone into the crowd and saw Leslie. She stood in front of Nick who looked at me over her shoulder. Even in a crowd that big she stood out like a sore thumb. I picked the first song I could think of.

“Good choice,” they said. “Can you sing it?”

“Yes,” I said to my own amazement. “I can sing it.”

They shoved me toward the microphone and played the intro and I kept my eyes on her as I sang.

When I’m with you
It doesn’t matter where we are

I watched her kiss Nick again just as we finished the first verse.

Mostly I’m silent
Silent      (2)

I stayed on the stage and sang five more songs before we took a break. I saw Cowgirl dance with just about everybody in my pledge class and I recognized the faces of most of the guys as they moved across the dance floor. Mostly though I watched Leslie and Nick. I’d known him my whole life and her I’d met just twice, but if ever there were two people who looked like they belonged together it was they. She was just as beautiful as he was handsome, and I knew she was just as good on the inside as he was, maybe even better. Even though I knew that if anybody deserved her it was he, I couldn’t help but feel a little bit jealous. I’d learned early in life that there were a lot of things I couldn’t have. In fact, I thought I’d gotten used to it, especially when it came to girls. But knowing I could never have her gave me a hollow feeling inside. It gave me an ache that I felt all over at once.

We finished the set and the guys in the band started slapping me on the back and asking me if I wanted to sing with them the next weekend. The bass player gave me a card with his telephone number on it and I stepped off the stage and walked across the dance floor to a bunch more back-slapping from just about everybody in the house. Even The Faceman sidled up and started pounding me on the shoulder.
“Nice job!” He said as he pounded away a little harder than he needed to. “Fuckin’ A! Nice job! I didn’t know you could sing like that.”

“Thanks Face.”

His date stood right beside him. She had dark hair and big blue eyes and she wore pressed slacks with a white blouse and a blue sweater vest. Everybody else in the place was sweating like crazy, but she was dry and soft and didn’t have a hair out of place. She looked like she’d just arrived for a dinner party. I knew right away that she’d been the prom queen and the cheerleader in high school. She was the girl who could never remember my name when I passed her in the hallway. She was the best-looking girl in school, and she also looked like she was used to being around a lot of money.

“Aren’t you going to introduce me?” She asked The Faceman.

He looked surprised at the request.

“Ahhh … sure!” he said. “This is Brooks … Brooks …”

“Holman,” I said.

“Yeah … Brooks Holman.”

I waited a few seconds for him to introduce her before I stuck my hand out. I got the feeling that The Faceman didn’t want to share even her name with me. She spoke as soon as our hands touched.

“I’m Ashleigh,” she said. “Ashleigh Pierce.”

Her hand felt just like the rest of her looked. It was cool and soft and smooth and flawless.

“I like the way you sing,” she said. She seemed to hang onto my hand a little longer than she needed to.

“Thanks, it was my first time.”

“Your first time?”

“Singing I mean … It was my first time singing in front of a crowd like that. I’ve never done it before.”

“Never done it before?”

“Singing …” I stammered again. “It’s my first time singing.”

She had me on my heels and she knew it. She smiled with two rows of teeth that were too straight to have gotten that way without some time at the orthodontist’s office. I wouldn’t have expected anything less.

“You should do more of it,” she said.
I had to pull my hand out of hers. The Faceman was pulling pretty hard on her shoulder too.

“Come on Ashleigh,” he said. “Let’s go downstairs and have a drink.”
She looked back over her shoulder as they walked away.
“I hope I’ll see you again,” she said, as The Faceman tugged harder on her arm.
“I’ll be looking for you,” I said. I couldn’t help but notice how well she fit into her tailored slacks.

After she’d disappeared I ran down the old section stairs and into the head. I barely managed to get my fly open in time. It’s amazing how quiet the head can be when you’re the only one in there. Sometimes it’s the quietest place in the whole world. That must be why I noticed the voices coming from behind one of the doors right across the hall. There were no other sounds to compete with it. I zipped up and moved closer to the door.

“Why do they make them like that?” one of the voices said. “The buckle I mean?”
“It’s just a regular buckle.”
“Does it pry up in the front or the back?”
Nobody spoke for a moment and then there was a lot of rustling around on the other side of the door. I couldn’t tell to whom the voices belonged.
“I’m hot damn it! Get them off!”
There was more rustling around and some creaking on the floor and I could just imagine a pair of jeans slipping down past a firm set of thighs.
“My toe’s caught!”
“What?”
“My toe’s caught on your belt loop.”
“Here! Let me help.”
My imagination was going wild. I could see white cotton panties, sticky with sweat, rolling up into tight strings that clung to each hip. The creaking of the floor was non-stop. I plastered my ear up against the door.
“He needs to get loose! He can’t stand it much longer!” the voice from inside the room said.

I wondered who else was in there.
“What did you say?” The words were breathless now. “Who needs to get loose?”
There was more noise as they thrashed around on the floor.
“Python!” he said finally. "He’s got to get out, if he doesn’t get loose it'll start to hurt!"
"Let me help," she said, and I could hear the zipper.

There was more bumping around and I could just imagine python springing out from the denim and swaying back and forth in the dim light on the other side of the door. I waited for what seemed like an eternity.

"Thank God!" he said. "It had to get loose. It needed to be free."

I waited again for what seemed to be forever.

"Oh Woody," she said finally.

"Do you like it?"

"I'd heard about it, but I've never .. Oh Woody ... It's even more than I thought!"

There was a long stretch of time with no sound at all. I left my ear up against the door for another minute or two without hearing anything. So I went upstairs and found Cowgirl with Nick and Leslie on the dance floor. Cowgirl punched me in the arm as soon as I walked up, and Nick started slapping me on the back like everybody else. Leslie just smiled big enough for me to see her crooked tooth for an instant before she closed her lips. She might have considered her tooth a flaw, but I thought it made her look even more beautiful. She was by far the most beautiful girl at the dance. She was the most beautiful girl anywhere. She made even Ashleigh Pierce look plain.

We walked down the old section stairs and into Zeke's room. Mitchell was lying on the floor and all of us had to step over him to find a place to sit. He was on his back and a little bit of drool dribbled out of the corner of his mouth. Olivia Newton-John was long gone. The room smelled like sweat and booze. Nick handed me another rum and coke and we listened to the music. I sat between Leslie and Cowgirl and tried to divide my attention equally between the two of them, but I couldn't help but spend a little more time in Leslie's direction.

"What do you think of our Pledge Dance?" I asked her. The music was so loud I could barely hear myself speak.

She leaned closer toward me and pulled her hair back behind her ear. I could see the goosebumps on her skin.

"What?" she asked.

I leaned closer and spoke louder. I could smell the scent of her now. She smelled like fresh sweat mixed with soap and flowers. I couldn't help but linger around her neck a little longer than I needed to.

"Are you having fun?" I asked, almost reluctant to finish the question. She put her hand on my knee when she answered.
“I’ve never been to a party like this,” she said. “Some of it I like, especially you’re singing.”

“It wasn’t that much,” I said, as I tried to control my fluttering heart. My skin tingled beneath her hand.

“Yes it is,” she said. “I’m beginning to think you’re everything he says you are.”

“Who?”

“Nick.”

“Oh,” I said. “I wouldn’t pay too much attention to him.”

I was enjoying the feel of her hand on my knee. I didn’t want her to ever move it. I sat there like a dummy without saying anything until finally she moved her hand back to her lap.

“It’s no big deal,” I said, as I shrugged my shoulders.

I searched for something else to say. I didn’t want the conversation to die, but being so close to her made it hard for me to think. She was so beautiful … but she also made me feel strangely confident.

“I know all about you,” she said finally. “He’s told me everything. I didn’t think all of it could be true, but now I’m starting to think he’s right.”

“He full of hot air.”

“I don’t think so.”

I’d never been around anybody who made me feel so good.

“Where are you from?” I asked. I knew the question was lame, but I wanted to know.

She moved around a little bit in her seat and said: “The City.”

The City was in the western part of the state. It may as well have been in a different country as far as I was concerned. People from our town never went there, and the only things we knew about it were from rumors and the news. The city was full of concrete and fog and tough street kids who fought with knives. I’d been there once when I was a kid and it was big … big and cold and scary as hell compared to our little town.

“What part of the city?” I asked.

It was the next logical question, but I could see that it made her squirm in her chair even more.

“The south side,” she said.

I nodded my head and wondered if I’d ruined everything. The south side was the toughest part of all. It was dangerous on the south side. A person didn’t want to get stuck in that part of town all alone.

“What’s your major?”
I almost winced when I asked that one. Everybody always asked that question, but just like everything else about her, I really wanted to know. I was relieved when she answered. She seemed happy to get away from the business of where she came from.

“I haven’t made up my mind yet. Business! Or architecture! Or maybe engineering or broadcasting! I can’t decide.”

“Broadcasting?”

“It’s just a dream.”

“You should do it. You’d look great on the evening news.”

I knew I should have been paying more attention to Cowgirl but I couldn’t take my eyes off of her. She looked down at Mitchell on the floor.

“Who’s that?” she asked.

“That’s Mitchell,” I said, as I looked down at him too. “He’s had too many rum and cokes.”

“Is he all right?”

“He will be tomorrow … maybe.”

Mitchell snorted and rolled over on the carpet. Zeke and his date moved their feet out of his way.

“Where’s his date?”

“I haven’t seen her for a couple of hours.”

“Poor Mitchell,” she said. “He missed the only pledge dance he’ll ever have.”

She turned toward me and put her hand on my knee again. I felt a big lump in my throat. My heart beat faster and my leg tingled again where she touched it.

“There are so many things to see and do,” she said. “And sometimes we only get one chance. I’m sorry Mitchell missed his pledge dance. He’ll never have another one.” She looked back at Mitchell and I heard her say almost to herself: “We’ve got to make the most of our chances.”

She was extraordinary. Right then I knew I’d never know anyone to compare with her. Just the site of her made my heart race. But knowing I couldn’t have her made it sink at the same time.

I sat in the little room between Cowgirl and Leslie and listened to the stereo and stared across at the opposite wall. Nick and Leslie stood up and went back to the dance and I watched her leave with her arm looped inside his. I listened to the baritone saxophone come in with the trumpets at the chorus. I closed my eyes and felt the notes run from the middle of my head down the back of my neck. I didn’t notice Cowgirl’s head resting on my shoulder.
22
Poker

Margaret looked over the top of her cards. They were close to her nose, and her eyes peered out from behind the smudged lenses of her bifocals. They were patient and calculating eyes. They were the eyes of a viper waiting for a chance to strike.

“A couple of Goddamn sharks!” she said. “That’s what you are! With all of the patsies to fleece in this place, how did I get stuck playing with the two of you?”

“Two cards.” Nick said.

He slowly placed his cards face down on the table top and slid them toward her, ignoring her comment.

“Nuisance was bad enough!” she continued, as she flipped two cards off the top of the deck and pitched them toward Nick. “But now I’ve got this guy to worry about too. It was a mistake teaching you to play,” she said to me.

I did my best to ignore the compliment. Flattery was just another form of distraction for Margaret. She’d do anything to gain an edge.

"I'll take one card," I said.

She passed me the card and changed tactics.

"How was the dance last week?"

"Good!" I said.

"Real good!" Nick said, as he nodded his head slowly up and down.

Margaret took two cards off the top of the deck and looked at them only briefly before directing her attention back toward us.

"Well! Come on! Spill it!" she said. “Did either of you get any?”

"Jesus Margaret!" Nick said. “Is that all you think about?”

"When I was your age it was all I thought about," she said. “I still think about it sometimes, I just can't get anybody else interested anymore."
She grabbed her cigarette from the plastic plate and took a drag. She blew the smoke out through her nose.

"How about it boys? Either of you interested in giving an old lady a tumble? Just for old time's sake."

I could see Nick shudder on the other side of the table. "Jesus Margaret!" he said. "I don't even like to think about that."

"Count me out too," I said.

She leaned back in her chair with her cards still close to her nose.

"What else do you boys give a shit about anyway?" She asked absently as she moved her cards around within her hand. "And don't you smile smarty!" She said to me. Her lips peeled back from her smoke-stained teeth. "I heard about that little red head crawling all over you like a French whore after you did the Frank Sinatra routine. You're probably the one who got his stinger wet at the dance aren't you?"

I could feel my face flush hot as Nick burst into laughter. Margaret coughed up a wad of phlegm and swallowed it before she placed the cigarette back on the plate. Her powers of distraction were extraordinary.

"I know of one guy who got some," I said.

The cards dropped from in front of her nose. Now maybe it was my turn for a little distraction.

"Who?" she asked.

"Woody," I answered proudly. "I heard the whole thing through the door by the second floor head."

Margaret dismissed the whole statement with a wave of her hand.

"That's nothing," she said. "Woody's the king and everybody knows it."

"I know somebody else who got some," Nick said.

Again Margaret let her cards dip below the level of her chin.

"Who?" she asked.

"Maxwell"

"Maxwell!" Margaret said. "From the God Squad?"

"That's right," Nick said. "Down in the boiler room. Moose heard some noise in there, and when he stuck his head through the door he found Maxwell and his date both buck naked."

"Well I'll be damned," Margaret said. "Scott Maxwell ... that little Christian son-of-a-bitch!"
"He gets more than you think," Nick said. "That Christian routine is a good scam for making out, and he does a good job with it. He always says he wants to find a good virgin Christian girl to take to the dance. But he sure finds a lot of horny ones instead … real horny little Christian girls. He's famous for that."

Margaret shook her head again. "That little Christian son-of-a-bitch," she said again as she looked back at her cards.

I couldn't figure out who'd done the better job of distraction, Nick or Margaret.

"How come the boiler room?" she asked as she tossed two quarters on the table. "That's fifty cents to you Nuisance. Pay up or get out of my way."

Nick put his two quarters into the pot.

"It's warm in there, and private too, except there's no lock on the door. That's the big problem Maxwell has had with the boiler room. Nobody thought to put a lock on the door. I guess they didn't take that into consideration when they built the place."

"I'll meet the fifty and raise a quarter." I said.

"What are you up to egghead?" Margaret asked me, as she rolled a quarter out onto the table. Nick did the same. She picked up her cards and looked back at Nick.

"I heard about you too," She said.

"What did I do?"

"I heard about you and that girlfriend of yours! Making out on the dance floor! I'm surprised at you! ... How many cards?" She held the deck out in front of him. "Come on Nuisance! I don't have all day."

Nick looked quickly at his hand. "I'll take one card," he said. I thought I saw him blush.

"How about you Brooks?"

"I'll take two cards."

"My sources tell me your sweet on this girl Nuisance. They say you looked like you'd been shot in the ass by cupid himself."

Nick waved his hand back and forth slowly as if flicking away a fly. "Let's change the subject Margaret." He tried to concentrate on his cards.

"I'll raise seventy five cents," Margaret said as she looked across the table at Nick. "Tell me about this girl of yours Nuisance." She'd finally found the key to unraveling his concentration.

Nick shrugged. "I met her in one of my classes. She's real nice."

"She's better than nice," I said. "She's the best girl on campus, and he's crazy about her. I've seen him with lots of girls Margaret, and I know he's crazy about this one."
Nick flipped three quarters onto the table. "You're one to talk! Where's your seventy five cents!"

I put a dollar on the table
"How's your classes?" She asked Nick.
"Fine Margaret. Just fine."
"How were your mid-terms?" This time I asked the question.
"Good, real good," he said. He squinted at his cards and wiggled in his chair. We both watched Margaret meet my quarter and add a dollar bill.

Margaret took a drag off her cigarette and placed the butt back on the plastic dinner plate. She drummed her fingers on the table and let her cards slip down to the level of her chin as she looked thoughtfully at Nick.

"You're a little bit bigger aren't you?"
"What?"
"You've gained weight. How much do you weigh now?"
"One ninety six," Nick said with obvious satisfaction.
"Been hitting the weights pretty hard?" She'd let her cards slip face down on the tabletop now. She looked hard at Nick.

"I've been lifting like crazy."
"You've always lifted like crazy. How come you're bigger all of a sudden?"
"It must be those protein pills I guess."
"Uh huh ... I'm sure that helps." She pulled her cards back up in front of her nose. "That's a buck twenty five to you Nuisance," she said, still watching his eyes. Nick placed a buck fifty in the pot.

"I thought maybe next semester we could room together Nick," I said. "If that's okay."
"Sure ... next semester would be fine ... just fine."
"That's a buck twenty five to you," Margaret said. She was talking to me now but still looking at Nick.

"Too steep for me," I said, placing my cards face down on the table.
Margaret kept looking at Nick. She met the twenty-five cents and pondered her next move.

"I raise you fifty," she said. She moved the money to the middle of the table. We both watched Nick. He reached into his hip pocket and pulled out his wallet. He flipped a five-dollar bill on the table. He looked like he could care less.
“That’s two fifty to you Margaret,” I whispered, as I leaned forward in my chair. I let my chin rest on the top of my fist. I’d never seen such bidding, but Margaret didn’t even blink. She just kept staring across the table at Nick.

“I think you look a little different too Nuisance,” she said. “Your face looks different. Maybe it’s just the extra weight.”

“What are you talking about?” Nick responded.

I couldn’t take my eyes off the pot of money.

“I’m just saying that you’re a little bit heavier, and you look a little different too.”

“Are you in or out of this?” he asked her.

“I fold,” she said. "Let's see the full house."

He flipped over two pair, three's and ten's.

Margaret gasped out loud.

"I'm out," Nick said, as he reached for the money and stuffed it into his pocket.

"What!" Margaret said. "You can't leave now. I need a chance to get my money back!"

"Sorry Margaret."

We watched him walk out of the room and both of us knew the game was over. Nick and Margaret played alone sometimes, but the two of us saw no point in playing without him.

“Do you think he looks different?” she asked me. “Around the eyes I mean.”

“I haven’t noticed.”

“I think he does.”

“I’m glad he’s gained weight. He’s been trying to gain weight for years.”

“How long has he been one ninety?”

“Forever I guess. Ever since high school.”

“Maybe it’s nothing.”

“What is Margaret?”

“Nothing I guess. Maybe it’s just my imagination, but there’s something different about him.”

Ashleigh Pierce

I walked into the lecture hall and took my seat. The guy in front of me was talking nonstop to nobody in particular. He must have been pretty nervous because he just couldn’t seem to shut
up. Mid terms were due back today and the pre-meds were going to start their pecking order. The poor son-of-a-bitch in front of me didn’t know where he was going to fit in.

"I have the mid-terms," Dr. Cervinski said as he walked in and plopped a stack of papers on his desk. "If everybody would please sit down I'd like to get started."

Cervinski was a lean angular guy with thick round black-rimmed glasses. He was one of those guys who was so darn smart he wasn’t quite normal. He spoke five different languages and sometimes wrote swear words on the overhead projector in Chinese when he lectured. At least that’s what he’d said they were. I’d tried to copy a few of them down so I could attempt to decipher them in the library, but he never left them up long enough to get properly reproduced. It’s hard enough to copy Chinese even when you know it; it’s almost impossible to get it right when you’ve never seen it before.

He carefully straightened the papers on the desk and then adjusted his glasses with both hands. His thin delicate fingers placed the frames just right on his nose before he spoke.

"Before we hand out the midterms I'd like to ask a few people to stand up," he said. He was looking up and scanning the room as he spoke. "These are the highest grades in the class, and I want to match the face with the grade."

I could almost feel the hearts of the pre-meds start to flutter like a giant herd of hummingbirds.

Cervinski adjusted his glasses once more and said, "Would Brooks Holman please stand up."

Four hundred pairs of eyes searched the lecture hall for me. I took my time standing up.

"Brooks," he said, "you had the highest grade." Then he turned toward the class and said, "This is the guy who ruined the grading curve."

A few forced laughs drifted out of the mob, but some of the pre-meds looked like they were about ready to have a seizure. The standard had been set, and it wasn't one of them.

"Come down and get your test Brooks," he said.

I walked down the center isle past all of the faces and took my test from Cervinski. When I turned around to go back up the stairs I saw Ashleigh Pierce sitting in the front row. She had on a light blue cashmere sweater that matched her eyes. She looked just as cool and just as fresh as she did with The Faceman at the Pledge Dance. She was looking at me with the rest of them and she was doing her best to get me to look back. She crossed her legs just as our eyes met. I saw her skirt hike up on her thigh and I almost fell over. She smiled at me and said:

"Hi Brooks."
She held out her hand and I touched it as I walked by and it felt just like it had at the dance. It felt cool and soft and flawless.

I shuffled past her and tried to smile. I felt short of breath and lightheaded as I went back up the stairs. I barely managed to get to my seat without fainting. I’d spent my whole life looking at girls like Ashleigh Pierce and getting used to the idea that they would never be mine. The thought of her made me feel inadequate, mystified, and intoxicated all at the same time. The worst part of it was just how pitiful the whole thing was. She’d made me feel that way just by remembering my name.

24
Six Weeks

Late November had settled over the campus just like it used to back home. Nature made no exception for academics. Gray clouds hovered at fifteen hundred feet and spit rain fitfully between short periods of rest. It was rain that teased, like mist that got too heavy in the wind. It came down in small drops that were cold and persistent and worked their way right through your jacket and into your skin. It was hard, wet, naked rain.

Nick was crouched down on his right knee. The water from the muddy grass had long ago filtered its way through the thin pad that was supposed to protect him. It ran down through the holes in the top of his helmet too. The rain that missed the holes ran off the plastic and onto the back of his neck and then slid beneath his shoulder pads onto his spine. It made me shiver just to watch him. He wasn’t getting enough work to keep himself warm.

The quarterback stepped up in front of him, and put his hands out. He shouted as he looked at the safeties and cornerbacks on the other side of the imaginary line of scrimmage. Then at the second “hut” Nick lifted the ball up and watched as the quarterback backpedaled and watched the receivers glide out toward the defensive backs.

Nick ducked as the ball flew over his head. The pass was slightly behind the receiver, but he reached back and snared it with one hand just before the safety smacked into him. Fitzpatrick blew his whistle at the sound of the impact and the shouts of approval from the other coaches echoed off of the walls of the buildings surrounding the practice field.

"Nice catch! Damn it! Nice catch!" he said.

Nick dropped his head. The last game of the year was this Saturday. He’d spent the whole season holding tackling dummies and doing odd jobs on the scout team. It was a total
waste. He was bigger. There was no doubt about it. Whether he looked any different under his oversized uniform I wasn’t sure, but he was heavier and even stronger than usual. But in spite of the changes, the coaches hadn’t seemed to notice. It was almost like they’d stopped looking at him at all. They’d decided he couldn’t play and forgotten about him. I knew his head must have been screaming at him to quit, but he kept hanging on because another part of him wouldn’t let go. His heart wouldn’t allow him to become a “quitter.” That was the worst of all labels a guy could have. A “quitter” was what his coaches had schooled him to hate. Hope made him keep coming back for more. It was a hope that slowly dwindled just like the weather in late November, but he would never quit. He got up and moved mechanically toward the crowd in the center of the field.

“The names of the players on the traveling squad will be posted on the wall in the locker room,” Fitzpatrick shouted above the wind and the rain. “The rest of you guys can turn in your gear. We’re 7 and 3 and we couldn’t have done it without the guys on the scout team.”

Nick turned away and started the long walk toward the locker room. I didn’t wait for him. He’d be awhile getting cleaned up and I didn’t want to sit around in the rain. He wouldn’t feel much like talking anyway. It hurt him every time he didn’t make the traveling squad. There was no reason to expect it anymore, but it hurt him just the same. The wind spit more rain in my face as I pulled the collar of my jacket up and headed for the house.

The regular crowd was waiting for the news to start at five o’clock when I got there. Moose looked like a king on a throne sitting in one of the senior chairs. He held a Styrofoam cup that was one quarter filled with tobacco juice. I found an open spot on the floor just as Walter Cronkite was getting started. There was a big map of Vietnam behind him.

“B-52’s set a record bombing run in North Vietnam today as the U.S. resumed bombing until a peace accord could be reached,” Cronkite said. “President Nixon maintains his policy of "peace with honor," the same platform he used during his landslide election over George McGovern."

“Bomb the shit out of ‘em,” Moose said after spitting in his cup. “They can’t do anything about the B-52’s. We can drop bombs on ‘em all day, and none of our guys will get hurt.”

“I wonder how much one of those bombs cost?” Mitchell asked. He lay on the floor right next to me.

“Peace with honor!” Poopsie said from the sophomore couch. "I wonder if those bombs just kill dishonorable people."

"None of this stuff matters," Dudley said from the seat right next to Poopsie.
“What did you say?” The Faceman asked from the other side of the room.

The back door slammed shut and Nick walked into the room just as the map of Vietnam disappeared from behind Cronkite’s shoulder. He looked like he hadn’t even bothered to dry off after his shower. He threw his book bag on the floor and jumped on top of me. He must not have wasted any time turning in his gear either.

“You weigh a ton,” I said, as I tried to wiggle out from underneath him. I kicked Mitchell’s leg in the process. “Have you been gaining weight?”

“Two-o- two,” he said, “and still growing.” He tried a near side cradle but I slipped out of it. Mitchell rolled to his left to get out of our way without saying a word.


“Xerox! Now there’s a great company!” Big Wally said. He sat next to The Faceman on the junior couch. “There’s more and more of those copiers around. They’re all over. There’s one in almost every room in the library, and they’re almost all Xerox. I wish I owned a million shares of Xerox.”

“Do they make calculators?” Poopsie asked.

“Baretta’s got a calculator,” Morris volunteered.

“Shut up Morris!” The Faceman responded.

“Apollo seventeen is being prepared at Cape Kennedy for the last flight of the manned Apollo space program.” Cronkite said. “The mission is scheduled to land on the moon the eleventh of December, and return on the nineteenth.”

I tried to get my left leg over the top of Nick’s hip. The inside roll had worked ... sort of; I just needed to step-over.

“Now your in trouble!” I said, as my leg reached over the top of him. “Your ass is mine now!”

He let me complete the move without much resistance before saying anything at all.

“There’s word on the hill you have an admirer,” he said, after I’d come out on top.

“What are you talking about?” I asked, but The Faceman interrupted our conversation.

“Why not?” he asked.

“Why not what?” Woody responded.

“Why aren’t they going to send more guys up in space?” The Faceman sounded like he was getting pretty exasperated.
"They need the money to make more bombs for the B-52's so they can drop them on innocent women and children in remote Asian farm villages," Dudley said.

"What did you say?" Big Wally asked.

"Muhammad Ali knocked out Bob Foster last night in the eighth round of their heavyweight championship fight," Cronkite said.

Now we could all hear Dudley. He was raising his arms up over his head and shouting:

"Ain't no light-heavyweight got no business in the ring with Muhammad Dudli!"

"You have a secret admirer," Nick repeated. "I heard about it today."

My nose was stuck in his armpit. I couldn't get it out no matter how hard I tried. I couldn't even move my head.

"So who's my secret admirer?" I asked, the words barely escaping from beneath his pit.

"What did you say?"

"Who's my secret admirer!" I asked again, almost shouting the words from beneath him as I tried to wiggle free from the half nelson. He let me roll half way before he stopped me with his left arm.

"Thousands cheered in the streets of Buenos Aires today as Juan Peron returned after seventeen years in exile," Cronkite said.

"Ashleigh Pierce." Nick said. His voice was loud enough for the whole room to hear him.

"What about Ashleigh Pierce?" The Faceman asked.

"She's got a crush on Brooks," Nick said. "It seems she liked his singing at the pledge dance the other night, and his score in the chemistry test didn't hurt either. She's pretty impressed with our boy here. He's becoming a big man on campus."

"That's bullshit!" The Faceman sputtered. "She was at the pledge dance with me just a few weeks ago."

"She'd rather have been with Brooks." Nick said. It was pretty obvious he was really enjoying this.

"She's the best-looking girl on campus, and rich too." Big Wally said with a grin.

"Shut the fuck up Wally!" The Faceman shouted. He sounded pretty pissed off.

"You aren't mad are you Face?" Woody asked. "She only went out with you because she wanted to be nice. She probably felt sorry for you."

"Eat my shorts Woody!" The Faceman sputtered.

"Libya refused to prosecute or extradite the Palestinians who hijacked a German Jetliner two weeks ago," Cronkite said.
“She wants to go out with Brooks,” Nick said proudly. “She wants to invite him to their dance next week.” He reached down and pushed his thumb into my ribs. It felt like he’d jabbed me with an electric probe.

“Bullshit!” The Faceman shouted. “I call six weeks!”

The whole room became quiet the moment he said it. Nick even stopped torturing me and nobody paid any attention to Walter Cronkite anymore.

“You aren’t dating her!” Moose said. “You only took her out once. You can’t call six weeks.”

“I can call it. I took her out, and I can call six weeks,” The Faceman said as he leaned back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest. Now every person in the room was looking at The Faceman in disbelief.

“Five hundred Native Americans seized the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington D.C. today demanding action on what they call a trial of broken treaties.” Cronkite said.

I looked up at Nick who looked at The Faceman just like everybody else. The muscles in his jaw were starting to twitch.

“What’s six weeks?” I asked.

Nick just kept looking at The Faceman. His cheeks were turning red.

“It’s the six week rule,” he said finally. “You can’t go out with a girl one of the other guys in the house has dated within six weeks ... it’s a house rule.”

“Eat my shorts Nick,” The Faceman said

“Fuck you Faceman!” Nick responded.

The veins were bulging out on his neck. His response surprised me. I’d never seen him get so hot so fast.

“It’s okay,” I said. “I don’t even know her.”

“She’s the prize,” Nick said. “She’s the one you should be with, and old dick-less over there won’t let you go out with her.”

The Faceman remained motionless in his chair, his arms folded across his chest.

“That’s pretty shitty,” Poopsie said, “but I don’t think The Faceman is really dick-less.”

I could feel Nick trembling and I wondered if he might explode. His whole face was red and it dawned on me that he might actually get up and beat the shit out of The Faceman. I cinched up tight around his waist just in case he went for it. I knew I couldn’t stop him, but maybe I could slow him down enough for The Faceman to escape. It wouldn’t take Nick long to make a mess of The Faceman.
"He wasn't dick-less in the shower this morning," Morris said. He smiled broadly from the sophomore couch as if proud of his joke.

"Did you check out The Faceman’s dick this morning?" Crasher asked.

“Well … not really.”

"Who else’s dick did you check out in the shower this morning Morris?"

"I didn’t really check out anybody else’s dick …."

"Just your own then?"

Morris smiled broadly. “Well sure!”

"Is that part of Baretta’s undercover work?" Dudley asked.

Poopsie gave Dudley a high five and I felt Nick relax.

"Maybe I don’t want to go out with her anyway," I said.

"Trust me," he responded. “You want to go out with her.”

"A Chicago judge nullified five convictions in the Chicago seven trial," Cronkite said. Just then the phone rang and Mitchell got up to get it.

"Over five hundred sex change operations have been done in the U.S. since Johns Hopkins Hospital did the first one in 1966. There are believed to be over 7500 transsexuals living in the United States," Cronkite continued.

"Did you hear that dick-less ... er ... Faceman?" Crasher asked. "You won't even need the operation."

"Kiss my ass Crasher," The Faceman said. He hadn’t changed his posture since the subject of Ashleigh Pierce came up.

"Hey you guys! Who’s Dave Johnson?" Mitchell asked, as he stuck his head back into the room.

Poopsie sighed and got up. “Get to know the brothers,” he said to Mitchell as he walked past.

"What the hell," Mitchell said as he sat down next to me again. "I thought his name was Poopsie."

"Christian David was sentenced to 20 years of imprisonment for drug trafficking in New York. It is believed that he controlled up to ten percent of the world’s heroin market," Cronkite said.

Just then the dinner chimes floated out from the dining room door and a stampede ensued. I tried to get up, but got knocked down by the herd. By the time I’d gotten back to my feet the whole room was empty except for Nick and me. He looked different in the peculiar light of
November that passed through the windows of the French doors. Margaret was right. His neck looked as wide as his head, and his forehead seemed to jut out over a pair of eyes that were almost black. He looked as dark as the weather.

“What's the matter?” I asked.

“It's that fucking Faceman ....”

“Forget it,” I said. “A girl like that ... she'll forget about me in a week.”

“She's smarter than you think,” he said. “And you don't know it, but you deserve her.”

“Forget it.”

“That fucking Faceman,” he said again. The look on his face almost scared me.

“Forget it,” I said again, as I put my arm around his shoulders and we turned toward the dining hall.

The wind slammed hard against the house and the windows shuddered all at once. A sheet of rain came with it and it suddenly felt like winter.

“And that's the way it is ...” Walter Cronkite said. “On Friday, November seventeenth, nineteen hundred seventy two.”
At eight thousand feet in early January the snow pack advances and recedes a millimeter at a time. During the day, when the sun shines at extreme angles from the south, some of the small snow crystals melt. One by one they disintegrate and billions of microscopic bits of water trickle and drip from the reservoir of snow to start their journey.

In the late morning hours, during breaks in the cloud cover, the droplets of water fall to the ground and coalesce in a trickle that burrows its way under the snow to mix with the other trickles and form a tiny creek. The tiny creeks gain speed and volume as they build a stream at seven thousand feet and combine with other streams to form the headwaters of The Big River. The water tumbles and churns it's way down the same rock channel it used for it's descent of the mountain ten thousand years ago. It cycles relentlessly, unchanging in its pattern as the water rushes on.

At night the cycle is interrupted as more snow falls. New snow pack is added to replace that which has melted and the snowline moves back down the mountain during the winter nights, sometimes a thousand vertical feet at a time. In the morning the cycle starts over again ... one microscopic ice crystal at a time.

Nick looked out the window at The Big River in the valley. It ran slow, dark, and muddy this time of year. Ice encased the edge of the banks near the black earth, and concentric rings formed in the center from the falling rain. The Big Dodge rolled along with the river, a big chunk of steel, chrome, and glass, flying down the road with only a slight shudder in the steering column at sixty-five miles an hour.

"Do you think any of those rings on the water could be from fish instead of raindrops?" he asked me.

I pondered the question for a moment before answering.

"Probably not," I said finally. "The fish are deep in the middle right now. There's nothing on the surface for them, so there's no reason for them to be there."

"You're probably right," he sighed.

I tried the windshield wipers again; wiggling the knob back and forth in the hope of getting them started. They still wouldn't work. Out of frustration I jiggled the knob in and out, hoping to somehow connect the short circuit hidden somewhere beneath the thick padded dash. I
wondered if we would be able to make it through the storm without the wipers, as I abandoned the knob and squinted through the drops slamming into the windshield.

"I've got to get the wipers fixed," I said, as I leaned over the wheel. "And by the way, I wanted to thank you."

"Thank me for what?"

"For getting me into The House," I said. "I never would have pledged if not for you."

He smiled and leaned back in the plastic-covered passenger's seat. "That's Okay," he said. "I have a feeling things would have worked out for you even if I wasn't there, but your welcome anyway. I'm glad you like it there. It's important to me that you like it."

I turned the dial on the radio. There were lots of stations down by the river, but we were having trouble finding a single one. I wondered if the short circuit for the radio was close to the one for the windshield wiper. Somewhere there were two ends of a wire just a millimeter apart, teasing us each time they touched and letting us listen to the radio.

"Is it what you expected?" he asked.

I waited to round the bend in the road before answering. The rain flowed off the windshield in tiny waves that marched from bottom to top. I'd slowed The Big Dodge down to forty.

"I liked my classes all right, but it's hard to know if I'll get into med school."

"You're ready for med school now," he said. "Everybody knows that. Ashleigh Pierce knows it, that's for sure."

"I don't even know her. I only talked to her once ... twice if you count the time in chemistry class. Except I didn't say anything. Do you think that counts?"

"What?"

"Do you think it counts if I didn't say anything?"

"Counts for what?"

"Counts for talking to her."

"I guess if you didn't say anything then is doesn't count."

"See what I mean.

"What?"

"I don't know her at all. I've only talked to her once."

"Forget it," he said. "You'll get to know her soon enough, just as soon as we get past six weeks."

"But ... I."
“No excuses.”
I wiggled the windshield wiper knob again but nothing happened.
“Thinking about her makes me feel hollow in my gut,” I said, resigned to the idea that he wouldn’t let it go.
“Get used to it. It’s a good thing.”
“Does Leslie make you feel like that?”
“Yes,” he said. “Every time I’m with her I feel funny.”
“Me too.”
“What?”
“I mean … I know the feeling. I guess all girls make me feel like that. Maybe she makes everybody feel like that when she’s with them.”
“Leslie or Ashleigh?”
I squirmed in my seat. Lot’s of girls made me feel like I did around Ashleigh, but nobody made me feel like I did when I was with Leslie.
“Both of them … I guess,” I said, and he seemed satisfied with the answer.
We were both squinting through the windshield. I was glad the defroster worked. We couldn’t see for shit, but at least we were warm and dry.
“You’ve made quite a name for yourself in just one semester,” he said. “I knew you would.” He was looking out the window at The Big River. “I wonder sometimes if you should even be at the university. Maybe you should go someplace else and get involved in something bigger and more important than this. I wonder sometimes if you’ll leave and I’ll never see you again.”
He didn’t move his eyes from the river and I wondered how to respond. He was right I guess. I’d been thinking about it too.
“It bothers me sometimes,” he continued. “It bothers me because I wonder if that’s the best thing for you. Maybe that’s what you’re supposed to do. Maybe that’s the way it’s meant to be, but I don’t like to think about it. I’ve known you my whole life, and I’ve gotten used to having you around.” He looked away from the river toward the floorboards of The Big Dodge.
"Why would I leave?" I asked. "Where would I go?"
"A million places I guess. Maybe you'll be a brain surgeon or a scientist. Maybe you'll find out you want to do something different than doctoring … be a senator or even president. Maybe you'll decide to be a musician, and transfer to another school."
My heart skipped a beat. I hadn’t said anything to him about it. I’d even tried to make myself deny it. I’d tried not to think about it, but the fact he knew didn’t surprise me. Ever since we were little kids he knew what I was thinking almost before I did.

"I wouldn’t do that," I said. "I like the university. There's no reason to go anyplace else. There’s no reason to change a thing."

I looked through the windshield at the strip of highway in front of us. The rain kept splattering and coalescing on the glass, and I tried the windshield wipers once more but nothing happened. For some reason I felt guilty. There was no reason to change a thing was there? All the feelings about the music would go away when I got a little older. It was a stupid idea anyway. There was no future for a musician. There was no money in it. It didn’t make any sense to go after it. There was no reason to change anything. Life would be just the way we’d always planned it. He was the best friend I’d ever had. He was the only friend I’d ever had that really mattered, and I’d never abandon him.

"How about you? Are you glad you went to the university?" I asked.

"Sure. Everything’s working out fine."

"Are you going to play spring ball?"

"Of course," he said. "Why not?"

"I thought spring ball was optional," I said. "You don’t have to turn out do you?"

"If I’m going to get Coach Fitzpatrick’s attention, I’ve got to do it in spring ball."

"You’re bigger. That should get his attention," I said. "Margaret and I both think you’re bigger."

I had to keep my head craned over the steering wheel. The rain was coming down lighter than it had a few moments ago. Shafts of sunlight were peeking out through an opening in the clouds ahead of us.

"Two oh five," he said with a smile. "It’s the biggest I’ve ever been in my whole life." He looked down and formed a fist with his right hand and the muscles popped out beneath the skin of his forearm.

“Do you take economics again this semester?” I asked.

He didn’t move his eyes from his forearm. He opened and closed his fist and the cords of muscle bulged and relaxed with each cycle. “Sure,” he said. “I’ll get that out of the way too.”

“Can you handle both of them?”

“Sure. No problem.”
We hit a break in the clouds and the rain suddenly stopped. We both watched as the windshield shed the water and the sun shone down through it.

"I'm proud to be your friend," he said.

I didn’t say anything. I couldn’t because at that moment the end of my nose started to sting and I felt moisture in the corner of my eye. He was like that. When we were little kids he would say things out of the clear blue sky and catch me off guard. It was always easy for him. He could make complicated feelings sound simple.

I didn’t think I could even describe my feelings about him. In the end I had no better way to say it than he did. The truth was that the pride belonged to me. It always had and always would. My feelings had started a long time ago and they had been building up one tiny crystal at a time, just like the snow pack at eight thousand feet. Our friendship had grown until it was bigger than almost anything else was.

The Big River ran with us on the south side of the road. Neither of us spoke as we looked at the deep water working it’s way west.
of shit as stereos go but perfect for a party like this one. It was propped up on a rickety card table in the corner of the recreation room. The speakers were blaring out some sort of unrecognizable rock, with lots of base bumping along loud enough so that everybody in the room needed to shout to be heard. The shouting made things even more confusing.

The keg sat in the opposite corner of the room ... over by the ubiquitous drain that seemed to occupy a different place in every floor in the basement. The amount of beer reaching the floor always seemed to be a little bit more than the drain could handle so the swill was pooling up around the keg, gurgling and bubbling into a shallow puddle beneath the tap. Every time somebody stepped toward the keg to get a beer the bottoms of their shoes got wet, and then they’d track the sudsy stuff all over the place. Eventually some of the guys would get drunk enough to play some beer hockey, or even do some barrel jumping over the empty keg.

Hopefully that would happen after the girls had left so they wouldn’t have to watch them fall on their asses in the stale beer, or worse yet watch them bleed when they missed their ass and landed on their nose.

The recreation room in the basement was the only place we had kegers. The floor was indestructible there, covered with ugly brown linoleum that was permanently bonded to the thick slab of cement beneath our feet. There was nothing on the sheet-rocked walls except for a few holes where elbows had gone astray during beer hockey games or a dent from somebody’s head when a barrel jump got out of control. There were two small windows high on the north wall that let in the only sunlight available to the room during the day. Water pipes ran their way in and out of the walls and ceiling to countless sinks, radiators, and toilets. They looked like serpents entering and exiting the room at random, each species of snake a slightly different color and width. I saw Nick over by the ping pong table along the west wall. He took a big gulp of beer from his mug and then waved me over. When I got there he took another drink and leaned his back against the wall and looked across the room. He smiled and then he nodded toward the opposite side.

“Booby’s ball-walkin’ again,” he said.

“What?” I asked.

“Check it out,” he answered.

I followed Nick’s gaze and found Booby and the girl he was talking to. She was a pretty co-ed with braided blonde hair and she listened intently as he told her a story. She leaned forward and started to smile and then burst into laughter as Booby finished the punch line. He
always seemed to have the right joke at the right time. He could be a charming son-of-a-bitch, that Booby.

Big Wally and Poopsie stood right beside him. They tried to contain themselves but failed miserably, snickering and almost choking on their beer. This made it even harder for Booby to keep a straight face. Big Wally and Poopsie were not there to help him. They were liabilities when it came to the art of ball-walkin'.

What the freshman pledge didn’t know, and what was painfully obvious to Nick, Big Wally, Poopsie, and now myself, was that before the conversation had started Booby had unzipped his pants and pulled his scrotum out through his fly. His dick was inside where it belonged, but there was a wrinkled little bundle of balls and flesh visible right beneath his belt buckle.

“He’s ball-walkin’ all right,” I said, and Nick nodded his head in agreement.

The object of the whole endeavor was to see how long he could talk to the girl before she noticed. There would be no doubt when she noticed ... everybody around her would know the instant she noticed. Booby's job was to keep her distracted enough to keep her eyes away from the wrinkled and hairy little ball of flesh.

We all watched in wonder as the master worked. Booby flashed his best suave grin and asked her another question. Watching him I had to admit a person would never guess he was ball-walkin’. Big Wally and Poopsie were gyrating around like a couple of tops as they tried to contain themselves. They were sure to be his undoing. A guy like Booby could last all night if he weren’t being sabotaged by a couple of clowns like Poopsie and Big Wally. He could be a charming son-of-a-bitch, that Booby. Nick looked at his watch.

“Booby’s early,” he said. “He usually doesn’t start ball-walkin’ until at least ten o’clock.”

“How long can he go?” I asked.

Nick took another drink of his beer. “A guy like Booby can go for thirty or forty minutes sometimes. He can be a charming son-of-a-bitch, that Booby.”

In another corner of the room The Faceman was trying to drape himself over Ashleigh Pierce. I didn’t know she would be here, and seeing her so unexpectedly made my stomach sink. The Faceman was leaning up against the wall, doing his best to look cool with a beer mug dangling from the index finger of his right hand, working on his latest pick-up line.

“I wonder what she’s doing here,” Nick said.

“Me too.”

“I was being sarcastic you moron.”
“What?”
“A girl like that, at a small-time mid-week function like this? I wouldn’t expect her to be here. It’s not like she needs a date. Why do you think she’s here?” he asked me.

I understood what he was getting at, and the old sinking feeling got even worse. It made me nervous just to look at her. She looked flawless again. She was wearing just the right amount of make-up, very little in fact ... just enough to make everybody in the room notice her. She had her hair pulled up on top of her head and even her neck looked beautiful. She wore a white blouse that was unbuttoned at the collar and I could see the little depression just above her breastbone. I couldn’t help but think again how expensive she looked. I also couldn’t help but think that she was probably worth every penny. Nick and I both took another long drink of beer and I tried not to stare at Ashleigh Pierce. She looked around the room, and then at her watch.

“She’s looking for you,” Nick said. “And The Faceman’s doing his best to keep her from finding you.”

“That’s okay,” I said, suddenly feeling like I needed more beer … a lot more beer. “It’s past six weeks.”

“Are you sure?”

He nodded his head and then grabbed my arm and pulled me over by the wall just in time to keep me from getting clobbered by Crasher who was running right at us with a beer mug in his hand and a wild look on his face. He ran straight toward the keg and when he reached the beer on the floor he slid across the slippery surface and little rooster tails of brew sprayed up from behind his tennis shoes as he careened toward the keg. He tried to drink from his mug as he slid and it was a mistake, because he lost his balance and crashed to the floor. He landed in the swill and spilled most of the remaining beer from his mug onto his chest. He looked back at Dudley and Trapper, who were applauding him. Crasher toasted them from the floor and drank what was left in his mug.

“I give you a seven,” Trapper said. “But I bet I can do better than that.”

Trapper waited for Crasher to get out of the way before taking his turn. The Faceman tried desperately to keep Ashleigh’s waning attention. Booby was still ball-walkin’ with the freshman pledge from the Gamma house. Big Wally was now making faces over the girl’s shoulder and Poopsie was starting to lose his composure. The ball-walkin’ scheme wouldn’t last much longer. Before long the whole place would degenerate into an ice skating, beer hockey, barrel jumping, ball-walkin’ mess ... and Ashleigh Pierce would be gone.
“Why don’t you go upstairs and play the piano,” Nick said to me as Trapper whizzed past us on his way toward the keg.

“What for?”

“You need the practice.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Just do it and I’ll take care of everything else.”

“Okay Nick, whatever you say.”

I didn’t argue with him. There was no point in it. I didn’t mind going up to the piano anyway, especially since I hadn’t been there all week. Halfway up the stairs I heard a scream from down in the basement and I wondered if Booby had run out of distractions and gotten himself caught. By the time I’d gotten to the living room the sounds from downstairs were indistinguishable from the music coming out of the piece-of-shit stereo and within minutes I was lost in the keyboards. I don’t know how long I was there before I heard her voice.

"Can you play for me?" she asked.

I turned around and saw her standing right behind me. I didn’t know if I should speak … or if I could.

She took a step back and said: “I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“It’s okay,” I said, feeling suddenly very short of breath.

We both looked at each other for what seemed like a long time until I finally found the breath to speak.

“Would you like to sit down?”

And just like that she was right next to me. She sat so close that our hips touched up against each other and I had the sensation that I was sitting next to a woman instead of a girl. My head swam in the closeness of her. I felt her shoulder brush up against mine and her touch felt like fire. My stomach twitched and my groins flushed and I thought that she even smelled like nothing I’d ever experienced before. She smiled at me and my heart raced.

“Will you play for me?” she asked again.

I nodded my head and placed my hands on the keys.

“How did you find me?” I asked.

“Your friend told me.”

I nodded my head again and played the first few measures of Tapestry.

"Sing it for me," she said. "I'd like to hear you sing too."
Downstairs the keg was nearly empty. Booby had his scrotum back in his pants and the piece-of-shit stereo was still banging away on top of the rickety old card table. Crasher and Trapper were probably soaked in beer and sliding right toward each other on a collision course in front of the drain in the linoleum floor. The Faceman was pissed off for sure, but none of that stuff mattered right now. We were upstairs and they were down, and it was all because of Nick.

27
Big Brother

I concentrated on the hydroboration-oxidation reaction. It made perfect sense. The alkene reacted with diborane to form an alkylborane. Then the alkylborane was oxidized to form an alcohol. The reaction was simple, and that was why alcohols were so ubiquitous. They were everywhere. Some of them were manufactured and others occurred naturally. I barely felt the heat from the study lamp dangling dangerously close to the top of my head as I concentrated on the book. It felt safe where I was. I turned the page and wondered what I’d find next.

There were four aliphatic rings that formed cholesterol, the naturally occurring alcohol known as a sterol. I imagined the stereochemistry of the molecule with the wave-like rings forming a plane from which the methyl groups jutted out. Cholesterol was just one of a larger group called steroids. I looked at the examples of steroids. Estrone, cortisone, and testosterone, all of them contained the same five aliphatic rings. I barely heard the door bang open in the old section hallway.

The hydroxyl group was attached at the seventeen position on the five carbon aliphatic ring. Testosterone was an androgen, a male sex hormone, the text said. I tried to burn the configuration into my brain. I closed my eyes, and drew the whole structure on the back of my eyelids. When I did that it stayed there for awhile, maybe not forever ... but for a few months anyway. I didn’t hear the footsteps in the hallway.

The next structure on the page was estrone, a female sex hormone. The hydroxyl group was attached at the three position instead of the seventeen. I closed my eyes again, but before I could memorize it Moose threw open my door with a crash. I looked up from my book so fast I bashed the back of my head into the study lamp. He stood right outside my door and yelled down the hallway as I flicked the light away and burned the back of my hand in the process."

“All frogs out of your rooms right now!” he shouted, as he stormed down the hallway. “You guys have screwed up for the last time! Get your asses out of your rooms, and up to the third floor.”
Trapper came out of his room at the same time as me and we both watched Moose swagger down the hallway.

"Hey Moose!" he said. "What gives!"

Moose turned around and spit tobacco juice into his cup and glared at Trapper and me.

"Your class has been screwing up!" he said. "The guys don't see much respect from you, and most of them think you don't deserve to become members. They want to see a few heads roll. They're talking about making an example of you guys." He spit in his cup again. "Just get your ass up to the third floor lounge. Make sure you get all of your pledge brothers up there too." He turned around and continued his crusade down the hallway. "Out of your rooms frogs!" He yelled again. "Study hours are over! Everybody up to the third floor lounge!"

Mitchell joined Trapper and me as we filed out of our rooms and marched up the stairs to the third floor. When we got there Crasher was pacing back and forth across the thin carpet. We sat down with the rest of our pledge brothers and watched Crasher mutter to himself. Otherwise the room was completely quiet.

"They're really pissed off," he finally said. "They want to talk to you one at a time." He shook his head as he walked. "They're upset with the way you've been doing the housework, and they think you've been slack with some of the house rules. You're grades aren't as good as they should be either. They want to let a few of you go. They want to make an example of some of you. They think we can pick up some better guys. They think we can find some pledges who will do what it takes to become a Sigma Tau."

Crasher couldn't seem to stop pacing as he spoke and our eyes followed him wherever he went. He was our pledge counselor. He was the one guy who was supposed to negotiate with the membership for us during our first year.

"They'll be coming up to get you one at a time," he said. "I'm not sure what they'll be asking you…. I just hope you've all read the pledge manual that we gave you at the start of the year."

"What pledge manual?" Mitchell asked. He looked ashen.

Crasher stopped in his tracks and looked at Mitchell.

"Didn't you read the pledge manual we gave you in the fall?"

Mitchell shook his head.

"God!" Crasher said, "I hope the rest of you did. I hope all of you memorized it."

We looked solemnly at Crasher. None of us said a word, but we were all thinking the same thing. The pledge manual had been promptly buried in the bottom of our closet shortly after
we received it. Crasher looked down at the floor and shook his head again. "Jesus!" He said. "Maybe they're right."

Just then Poopsie stuck his head around the corner of the stairway. "Trapper's first," he said, and we all watched as Trapper got up and walked toward Poopsie. "I've got to put this on you," Poopsie said, as he pulled a black blindfold out of his pocket. "I'll guide you the rest of the way."

Poopsie placed the blindfold on Trapper as we watched. He grabbed him by the arm and said. "Straight ahead Trapper."

We watched in stunned silence as our pledge brother disappeared down the dark stairwell. I turned toward Mitchell who looked as though he might puke. "I didn't read the pledge manual," he stammered. "I meant to ... I really did, but I just didn't get around to it, and now I'm screwed." He wrapped his arms around his shins and rested his forehead on his knees. "I don't want to get kicked out," he mumbled. "I think I'm gonna be sick."

The whole room was filled with some pretty solemn faces. Crasher was leaning up against the wall with his arms folded. He shook his head again as our eyes met and then he looked down at the floor. Mitchell managed to pull his head out from between his knees. He still looked pale as death itself.

We all heard a strange noise from deep within the bowels of the house. We almost felt it as much as we heard it. There was a vibration that came up through the foundation and a noise like the sound of distant thunder and then it was gone.

"We should stay united," I said to myself as much as to Mitchell. "We need to let them know we'll all stand up for each other. It's just like d'Artagnan always said: "One for all and all for one!"

Mitchell's face was just starting to regain some color. "Who the hell is d'Artagnan?" he asked.

Crasher tried to cover up a smile just as Poopsie stuck his head around the corner of the stairwell. "Brooks!" he said. "You're next!"

I stood up and walked toward Poopsie who held the black blindfold in his hand. He placed it across my eyes and eased me onto the staircase. I felt queasy as we moved down into the house. I didn't know if the story they were giving us was true or not, but they were up to something, and it was the not knowing that made my stomach turn. It was the not knowing about what lay ahead in life that made all of it so unsettling.
It was easy to map our movements from behind the blindfold. Poopsie took a few extra turns, and doubled back twice, but I knew we were in the chapter room when we stopped. It felt damp and warm, and there was a false sense of silence that surrounded us. I heard a creak, and then a soft shuffle of feet. The hard concrete floor felt smooth and well worn beneath my shoes as Poopsie and I moved toward the north side of the room. We stopped, and I heard him whisper in my ear.

"Just stand right here, and I'll take the blindfold off."

Glaring light greeted me as the blindfold came off. I squinted and rubbed my eyes as the harsh white beams momentarily blinded me. I looked up slowly to find that I was indeed in the chapter room, but I did not expect what I saw next.

In front of me sat John Pursell. The light shone down directly over his balding head, illuminating only the two of us. I could see no one else, but I knew the others were there. They said not a word, but I could sense them surrounding us. I started to wonder about what had happened to Trapper. Suddenly his fate seemed much more important than it had just moments before.

Pursell was sitting in a small wooden chair perched on a platform that was six inches above the floor. All six foot five inches of him looked down on me. He looked like a God on top of Mt. Olympus. He wore a black robe that cascaded down over his big shoulders. In his right hand he held a paddle two feet long and an inch thick made of black rubber. Holes had been drilled into the fat end of it and the opposite end tapered smoothly to a handle that rested in his powerful right hand. He slapped the paddle gently into his left thigh as he looked at me. I couldn’t take my eyes off of it. I wondered if Trapper was okay.

"Brooks!" Pursell said.

The sound of my name startled me. I looked up at him, but couldn’t manage to say a word. I felt my stomach turning like a twisted wash rag.

“You need to understand that the house is a give and take relationship. We’ve tried to offer you the things you need to succeed. We’ve offered you structure, friendship, and entertainment. We’ve offered you the resources you need to improve your academic and social life. The house has done this without asking for anything in return. But now we have some questions.” The paddle continued to move back and forth as he spoke. I watched it slap into his hand one more time and couldn’t help but wonder what it would feel like on my ass with him swinging it. It wasn’t a pretty thought.
“We want to know what you bring to the house,” he continued. “What do you have to offer us in return?”

I heard a muffled cough from behind me in the darkness. The question surprised me. What did I bring to the table? I wondered, as my mind raced frantically ahead. I fought the urge to answer too fast. I wanted some time to think.

I was there because of Nick of course. He was the closest thing to a brother I’d ever had. He was the person I cared about more than anyone else. The house was just a part of Nick, and that’s why I was now standing in front of Pursell. I tried to keep my thoughts straight as the paddle moved back and forth in Pursell’s hand.

“The house is like a friend,” I said finally. “It’s an important friend ... one of the best friends you’ll ever have. The house is like the friend that only a few people are lucky enough to find in their life. It’s the friend who will always be there for you when you need him. So I guess I offer the same things I would offer to my best friend. I’ll do the best I can to make sure the house is proud of me. I’ll protect the house, and stand up for it for as long as I’m a part of it. I’ll always be there when I’m needed, and I’ll always do my best to help. Mostly though, I’ll be loyal ... I’ll always be loyal no matter what. And if a time comes when we can’t be together, I’ll carry a part of it inside of me, and try to make sure people understand what it meant to me.”

Pursell raised his eyebrows and the rubber paddle stopped momentarily, frozen in time and space just a few inches from the end of my nose. He shook his head slightly as if momentarily dazed, and then he blinked his eyes and continued.

“A month ago we asked you to give us three names of older members in the house you wanted to have as you’re big brother. Your big brother is a member of the house who is your confidant. He will remain your big brother for the rest of your life. Next year you’ll have a little brother and your family line will continue through the house forever as little brother is paired with big brother each passing year. We asked you for three names, but you only gave us one.” Pursell paused and looked down at his paddle. "I hate to tell you this,” he said, as he stood up and towered over me. "But ... it’s my job ... to introduce you to your big brother Nick Strode."

The lights and voices came simultaneously as the membership descended on me in a rush. I staggered among the moving bodies and bright lights looking around until I saw him. He was coming toward me and then I felt myself being pulled into him ... pulled in by an unstoppable force. The others surrounded us. They slapped us on the back and I heard his voice in my ear as my feet came up off the floor.

“Nice speech!” he said. “Nobody has ever answered the question so well.”
The mob had hold of both of us now, pulling us toward the corner of the chapter room. Somebody stuck a cold beer in my hand, and I felt more slaps on the back as others congratulated us. I sat on the bench next to Nick who put his arm around me. Big Wally stood by the door.

"Quiet everybody!" he said, as he looked out the door and down the hallway. "Here comes Mitchell." Big Wally turned the light switch off, and Pursell returned to his wooden throne on top of his wooden box.

I sat in silence on the hard bench, and watched with the others as Poopsie led Mitchell through the door. He shuffled in with his hands clasped in front of his waist and his head bowed down. He walked as if he were not sure how much traction the floor offered him. Poopsie stopped him in front of Pursell and took the blindfold off. Mitchell rocked his head back and squinted into the light. He winced noticeably when he saw the sight in front of him. Pursell slowly started his speech, gently slapping the paddle in and out of his left hand. Mitchell shifted uneasily from one foot to the other as he listened.

"What do you bring to the house Mitchell?" Pursell finally asked. "What do you offer us in return?"

Mitchell's voice cracked when he spoke. "I'll do my housework," he said. "Really I will. And ... I'll read the pledge manual too. I'll start first thing tomorrow morning."

Pursell smiled under the bright light. The paddle never stopped moving as he gently waved it back and forth in front of Mitchell's nose. I took another sip of beer and vowed to keep the same promise for Nick that I'd just made to The House.

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28
Defending the Castle

In late February a cold mass of air slides off the Canadian Rockies and cleaves the warm, water-laden atmosphere that hovers over the top of the campus. It cuts the air like a gigantic angled knife, pushing it up as the front advances. The atmosphere rapidly ascends and the molecules begin to slow down with the loss of heat. They bump into each other less often, and the spaces between them contract until they slowly come together and condense at high altitude.

As the liquid forms, it gains weight and begins to fall. The swirling winds of the cold front toss the tiny droplets up and down, bringing the molecules even closer together and producing
tiny bits of condensed vapor that form ice crystals around minute specks of dust. Slowly the ice crystals push themselves together. One by one they grow larger in the swirling winds until they become too heavy to be supported by the chaotic atmosphere. They descend through the front, and drift into the relative calm of the cold imported air below. Gently … daintily they fall, spinning and dancing in the crisp quiet air until they silently cover the lawns and sidewalks and relentlessly fulfill their part of the water cycle.

Thump!!

Mitchell and I both heard it at the same time. We were walking through the living room and the noise sounded like somebody had head-butted the front door. We both looked at each other in surprise.

“What the hell was that?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I answered. “But maybe we’d better have a look.”

Mitchell opened the door and we were both surprised to see about fifty guys standing on the front lawn. One was out in front of the pack. He was at least six-four and he looked familiar but I couldn’t quite place him. He had a snowball in his right hand.

“It’s Kinney!” Mitchell whispered as we both stepped out onto the porch. “It’s Tom Kinney from the baseball team.”

Tom Kinney was a senior All-Conference player who pitched and played the outfield. He had a cannon for an arm. He smiled as he looked at us and tossed the snowball up and down.

“What do you want?” Mitchell asked. I was surprised at how confident he sounded.

“We just came down from the dorms to see if some of you fraternity guys wanted to have a little fun,” Kinney said. “I told these guys not to expect too much. We all know you’re just a bunch of pussies.”

“Fuck you!” Mitchell said.

I barely had time to recover from my surprise at Mitchell’s response before a bunch of snowballs came at us like a blast of buckshot.

The first one exploded on my thigh. I doubled over in pain and happened to duck an ice ball that caught Mitchell on the side of the head, spinning him around in a pirouette. We stumbled across the patio through a shower of snowballs. They hit us all over at once as we both tried to stagger toward the still-open front door. Just as we got to the doorway we were both knocked back outside by Nick who came rushing out at the same instant we were trying to get in. He knocked us aside and leaped from the porch to the sidewalk and landed right in front of Kinney
who made a big mistake when he grabbed Nick by the shirt collar and spun him around on the sidewalk. They both stumbled back against a parked car right in front of the house.

Kinney stood at least a head taller than Nick and he used his height advantage to pin him up against the fender of the car and shove his fist up under his chin. Everything had happened so fast that the rest of us seemed paralyzed at the turn of events. Mitchell and I stood there in silence on the porch, and all the guys from the dorms had stopped throwing snowballs in order to watch.

I saw Nick reach up and grab Kinney's wrist. He draped his fingers over the base of Kinney's thumb and with one motion that was too quick and powerful to stop he rotated the hand to the outside. All of us heard his wrist snap and everybody there knew we'd need a new pitcher in the spring. The flood of profanity that had been coming from Kinney's mouth stopped the instant the bone snapped. He started to scream, but before he had made much of a sound at all, Nick reached up and jammed his thumb right into his throat just as fast as a rattlesnake would strike a rat.

Now Kinney wasn't worried about the baseball team anymore. He wasn't worried about anything but getting his next breath. He couldn't keep himself from choking and gasping and wheezing all at once. It was as if there were a vice attached to the front of his throat. He moved his hands up toward his neck and I thought Nick would back off … but I was wrong. He moved in close and put both hands in the center of Kinney's chest. He lifted him up by his shirt and lunged forward, ramming the top of his head into the bridge of Kinney's nose. Blood gushed out and poured down the front of both of them. Kinney no longer even knew where he was. He'd have fallen right on his face if Nick hadn't held him up just long enough to ram his knee into his balls.

Kinney's whole body came up … his squished-flat balls supporting all of his weight on the top of Nick's knee. At the top of his ride Nick jerked him to the side and Kinney came down in a heap. It was a fierce, aching, searing-pain type of a heap that he'd never known until now. He choked and struggled to breathe. He spit blood onto the snow and clutched his balls as we all watched. The whole thing had taken about five seconds.

"Jesus!" Mitchell whispered. "I've never seen anything like that before."

The result didn't surprise me nor did the duration of it. I knew Kinney was screwed the moment he grabbed Nick by the shirt collar. The thing that surprised me was the brutality of it. I'd seen Nick take care of a few hotheaded guys before, but I'd never seen him make such a complete mess of a guy. Watching it made my stomach turn over.
As Mitchell and I stood on the porch and looked at Kinney roll over and moan in the snow, the other guys from the dorm recovered enough to close in on Nick. They backed him up against the car and he reached over and snapped the antennae off the front fender. He whipped it across the face of the guy closest to him and the rest of the guys stepped back for an instant to reconsider.

“We're under attack! The House is under attack!”

The call to arms was coming from me. I was standing on the front porch screaming my head off and then Mitchell was screaming too and we both heard a rumble that echoed through the stairwells of the house. It grew louder and louder until all the bodies started to pour out of the front door. Every single member came out into the snow. Some of them were only wearing their tee shirts and boxer shorts, but they came anyway. They came roaring out of the house to the last man.

The guys from the dorm quickly forgot about Nick and started to retreat back up the hill. Nick grabbed one of them who'd been a little too slow getting away and made short work of him. He kicked his feet out from beneath him and stuffed his head into the snow. He smeared the guy's face back and forth a few times before pulling him up by the hair and letting him spit snow and grass.

I got swept up with the rest of the mob. The guys from the dorms were concentrating together and backing up the hill. I stopped to check on Kinney who was conscious and sitting with his back up against the car. He cradled his balls in his hands and stared straight ahead through the commotion as if he didn’t know where he was. The blood from his nose had coagulated on his chin.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

“What happened?” he whispered.

“Can you get back home?”

“My balls hurt,” he said. “And my wrist hurts too. What happened to my wrist?”

Crasher came over and leaned down by the two of us.

“Is he okay?”

“He’s still out of it,” I said.

“What happened to my balls?” Kinney asked again.

Crasher was getting impatient. "Let’s go," he said. “He’ll be all right. Let’s leave him here and push these bastards all the way back to the dorms."
He made a snowball as he spoke and then he stood up and threw it in the general direction of the guys from the dorm.

"Are you going to be all right?" I asked Kinney again.

"I think my wrist is broken."

"Can you get to the student health building?"

"Point me in the right direction."

I stood him up and aimed him in the general direction of the student health building. He staggered forward under his own power still cradling his balls with both hands. I watched him until he reached the corner and once I was sure he’d make it, I turned around and followed Crasher.

Most of the guys from the dorms were running away from us now. They were overwhelmed by the big turnout after their attack. I felt obliged to help push them back over the top of the hill, but I also felt a little bit bad about not taking better care of Kinney. I wondered if he would have taken care of me if I’d have been the one stupid enough to pick a fight with Nick.

The other houses on Greek Row were not as lucky as the Sigma Tau’s. Most of the attacking forces from the dorms had stopped on top of the hill and the houses up there were having a harder time overcoming them. As we pushed the invaders back we ran into bigger and bigger crowds. We had to free the houses one at a time by outflanking the guys from the dorms and gaining numbers as the houses were liberated. Before long our guys outnumbered theirs and they were retreating up the hill in total confusion. I finally caught up with Nick who was right at the front of the fight up on top of the hill. It was fierce up there and he was throwing snow at anyone who was in front of him.

"Hey!" I shouted, "Don’t you think it’s time to back off?"

He didn’t hear me. His face was flushed and his eyes looked wild. He just kept packing snow and throwing it. He looked way too pissed off, and “Fucking assholes!” was the only thing I could hear him say.

He ran after some poor guy who wasn’t quite fast enough and rubbed his face in the snow before standing up and kicking him in the ribs. I couldn’t tell if he was one of ours or one of theirs.

"Stop it!" I shouted. “That’s enough.”

"All of you!" I heard him scream. “I’ll get every one of you assholes!”

The guys from the dorms were in full retreat now, backing down the hill in a group that got bigger and bigger the closer they got to home. Our group, on the other hand, was getting smaller.
and smaller the further we got from Greek Row. The snowball fight was fizzling out for the most part, except for Nick who just kept throwing snow and screaming and running after anybody in front of him.

"Nick!" I shouted. "That's enough! Let's go back home!"

I ran up and grabbed his arm and tried to stop him, but he turned around and shoved me to the ground. His face looked livid with rage. I looked around at our thinning ranks from the seat of my pants in the snow. I knew we were getting too far from home. I could see the dorms looming ahead of us, and the mob of guys in front of us was bigger and seemed in less of a hurry to retreat.

"You're going too far!" I shouted at Nick as he moved away from me, but he didn't seem to hear me or care. He acted like he didn't even know me. He picked up more snow and threw it without even packing it. I got up and ran down the hill to my right, cutting through the back part of the campus and going cross-country through the yard of the president's mansion. I sprinted all the way to the parking lot behind the house. Puffs of condensed air poured out of my lungs as I fumbled in my pocket for the keys.

It took me at least ten minutes to get the chains on. The Big Dodge had been sitting in the lot for at least two weeks, but when I turned the key to the ignition the old car acted as if had already been warmed up. The big V-8 jumped to life and settled into a low-pitched idle that made me feel better. I punched the "Drive" button and floored it and the chains started clacking on the fender wells and spitting gravel all over the Sigma Phi Omega house right behind me. I skidded out of the alley and headed straight across campus toward the dorms.

When I reached the road in front of the dorms I saw Nick chasing a guy across the street and he tackled him right in front of the buildings. I looked for the driveway into the parking lot but couldn't find it. Nick had the guy's face down in the snow and I could hear him screaming. I looked for a place to turn around.

By the time I made my second pass down the street the dorms were emptying out and Nick was surrounded. They had circled him like a pack of wolves. There were so many guys around him that he couldn't run even if he wanted to, but he wasn't in a mood to run. I rolled down the window of the car and yelled, but nobody paid any attention to me. I heard his voice through the window as I looked for the driveway.

"All of you!" He was screaming. "Every fucking one of you!"

A well-aimed snowball hit him in the leg and by the time he'd grabbed his thigh another one burst on his right shoulder. The pack closed in tighter and more snowballs flew. An ice ball
caught him on the side of the head and spun him around. The snowballs came from every
direction at once. He staggered as he tried to shield his face. I turned the front end of The Big
Dodge toward the crowd and floored it.

The wheels crashed into the curb and for an instant the big car went airborne. The sound
of the engine and the chains slapping on the wheel wells made the car sound like it had been
unleashed from hell. Everybody in the crowd noticed the car at the same time. It was headed
straight toward them, the headlights casting beams of light onto the snow and the big chromed
bumper jutting out like an arsenal of bombs and missiles.

The clacking sound slowed as I came to a stop at the edge of the parking lot. The front
wheels slowly rolled up onto the curb, raising the headlights into their eyes. The car idled there,
as if sizing up the crowd. The engine seemed to have a life of its own. It heaved and groaned
without me touching the accelerator. Suddenly it revved up and snarled at the mob and they
stepped back enough for me to get a good look at Nick. The rage was out of his face now. He
looked up from one knee in the middle of the crowd as if momentarily lost. He recognized the
sound of the car.

I touched the accelerator and The Big Dodge snarled again. It inched up a little bit on the
curb. Everybody had stopped throwing snowballs. No one in the crowd spoke. Nick’s left eye
was swollen shut. He got up and started staggering toward the car.

Everybody watched him walk toward us until one of the guys recovered enough to throw
an ice ball that hit Nick in the middle of the back. The Big Dodge reacted instantly. The engine
exploded and the car lurched over the curb onto the lawn. Snow and grass and dirt sprayed
away from the chained rear tires as the car fishtailed toward the crowd. The site of the out-of-
control car made everybody scatter except for Nick, who stood motionless in the middle of the
trampled snow.

The Big Dodge slid sideways on the lawn toward him, the tires seeming to suddenly find
traction where there had been none before. It stopped directly in front of him and the passenger
doors flew open all by itself. He staggered forward and climbed in. The heavy door slammed shut
and the crowd tightened around us. The engine revved up again; screaming into the night as the
tires threw rooster tails of snow, grass, and dirt again. The car fishtailed ninety degrees and
leapt directly at the mob. They scattered in all directions, diving into the bushes that lined the
front of the dorm as we roared past them spraying snow and slapping chain against metal. We
jumped the curb and landed in the parking lot. We fishtailed one more time and then the mob
started to shrink in the rear view mirror until they disappeared from view.
We skidded over the top of the hill and down the other side of the campus. We didn’t see a soul. There were cars stuffed into every available parking spot and I had to concentrate to avoid smacking into one of them.

“What the hell were you thinking?” I asked him.

He was slouched over in the passenger’s seat. His left eye was swollen shut and he was looking at his hands as if they didn’t belong to him. The knuckles were scuffed and raw. Tom Kinney’s blood still covered the front of his shirt.

“What’s wrong with you?” I asked him. “Why did you knock the shit out of that guy? Why did you go all the way down to the dorms? You’re lucky you didn’t get killed!”

“They attacked The House,” he said.

“Jesus! It was just a snowball fight! It was just for fun!”

“I don’t know what happened,” he said. “I didn’t mean for it to happen like that. I can’t even remember it.”

He started to shake all over at once, and then he tried to wipe his nose with the back of his trembling hand.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “What happened to me?”

I slowed the car down and turned off Greek row into the alley behind the house. The rhythm of the chains against the fender wells slowed down and the car slid into a spot next to Mitchell’s Rambler.

“You tell me,” I said. “Why did you act like that?”

“They were creaming you and Mitchell.”

“Yeah … but you didn’t have to beat the shit out of Kinney or those other guys.”

“Did I hurt anybody?”

“You broke Kinney’s nose and his wrist. You won’t score any points with the baseball coach, that’s for sure.”

“Does he know it was me?”

“The word will get around sure enough,” I said. I was starting to feel suddenly very tired.

“The baseball coach and Fitzpatrick are good friends,” Nick said. “I’ll be in an even bigger hole now. I’ll never get a chance to play after this.”

He was holding his hands up in front of his face again and they were trembling. He rotated them slowly back and forth, alternately looking at his knuckle and palm.

“What’s wrong with me?” he asked again.
I didn’t have an answer.

He opened the door of The Big Dodge and walked unsteadily toward The House. He almost bumped into the wall before he found the back door and went through it.

29
Mid term II

I moved to the next station. I wasn't sure which one it was. How many were there? How much time did we spend at each one? It didn't matter because there was only one voice. The voice in the back of the room that said, "next station," and then I moved. When we heard the voice we all moved. Sometimes the guy next to me needed a nudge to get started, but he always eventually moved over and that let me start another intellectual journey.

The lab smelled like formalin and stale dried leather. The floor was made up of yellow-gray squares of linoleum that could hide just about any kind of stain. Lots of long black-topped tables ran east to west. There were sinks carved into them that were made of stainless steel with faucets that came straight up into the air, and then dived down toward the drain after making a one hundred eighty-degree turn. Bunsen burners and glass beakers rested side by side on shelves that were built into the tables.

Gray clouds hovered outside the windows to the north. In mid-February we didn't see the sky very often. I stood all by myself among sixty-five other students at one of the stations. Each station contained something strange and wonderful, like a bone, or a feather, or a diagram of a snake's skeleton. Sometimes it was an electron photomicrograph. Sometimes it was a tooth, or a bat's wing pinned out on a cheap metal pan filled with dark brown wax. Beside each object lay a three by five note card taped to the black tabletop. The questions were written in precise red ink. Sometimes it was just one question. Sometimes it was two, or three, or four.

Each of us concentrated as we looked down at the note card. Some would realize the answer right away and scribble it down frantically on the answer sheet as if having a seizure. Some wouldn't write at all. They simply looked down at the black-topped table with the end of their pencil stuck into their mouth. They'd scratch their head, and sigh.

"Next station," the voice would say, and we'd all move to our left.

On top of the black-topped table were two small yellow-white structures propped upright with pins on a piece of cardboard. They looked like tiny bits of fragile scaffolding. I leaned down to get a closer look.
The top one had the letter A beside it, and the bottom one the letter B. They looked like small skeleton's, at least like a part of a skeleton. I saw two small concave surfaces and recognized them. They were pelvic girdles. They were two tiny pelvic girdles from two different animals staked out on the cardboard with pins. How marvelous! The differences were easy to see. Pelvic girdle A had a pubic bone that went forward ... it was a Saurischian, or reptile-like pelvis. Pelvic girdle B had a pubic bone that ran parallel to the ilium. It was an Ornithischian, or a bird-like pelvis. I looked down at the questions taped to the desk.

63. Quadriped

I wrote A by number 63 on the answer sheet. Modern day reptiles had a Saurischian pelvis. They walked on all four feet and were called quadripeds. It wasn't always so. During the Cretaceous and Jurassic period many of the dinosaurs walked on two feet, like birds. For some reason though, when the dinosaurs died, only the quadriped reptiles survived. I looked at the next question.

64. "Warm blooded"

I wrote B by number 64 on the answer sheet. Animal B walked in an upright posture; it was probably a bird. Birds have four chambered hearts just like mammals. Because the oxygenated blood is kept separate from the deoxygenated blood, birds and mammals are often called "warm blooded." I looked at the next question.

65. What is the difference between ilium and ileum?

It was a hint for the students having trouble recognizing the bones. Ilium was the term for the broad flat bone that made up a part of the pelvis. Ileum was the name of the second half of the small bowel. I wrote ilium- pelvis, ileum- intestine, by number 65 on the answer sheet.

I looked back at the tiny bones and daydreamed about dinosaurs while the other kids sweated. The ornithischians were large and ponderous animals like Stegosaurus. The saurischians, on the other hand, were the rulers of the day. Some of them were the largest land mammals that ever lived ... like Brontosaurus, while others like Allosaurus and Tyrannosaurus were the most memorable.
I loved the practical exams. It was one of the only times I felt any power at all. Everybody wants power whether they admit it or not, and I felt something special when I took the tests.

I looked at the small bones again and wondered if maybe I could go just about anywhere and do just about anything if I was willing to work hard enough. The problem was choosing which part of the sky to shoot for, but I couldn’t get too far ahead of myself. Nick had been worried about his mid-term. He was struggling with his economics class again, even though he wouldn’t admit it

I thought about the Juilliard School again and wondered what it would be like. I felt like I might apply. I wondered if I could make it.

"Next station!" The voice said.

I moved on to the next station. There was a six-inch embryo that bobbed up and down in a large jar of orange-tinged formalin. It was an equine embryo. It had to be. I could see the bones of the limbs clearly. The middle digit was much larger than the others were. The animal would have walked on the end of its toe had it completed its development. I looked at the questions on the three by five card.

30
Pledge Week

It wasn't supposed to be called hell week. The official name was pledge week, but it sure felt like hell week.

"Don't call it hell week when you're up on the hill," Cougar had told us when we left for class on Monday morning. "If they hear about it they'll shut us down."

Hell week was not the term they wanted us to use, but it was the term that best described it. Things didn't really get going until the weekend. It was the hell weekend you had to watch out for. It was a “mini-hell week.”

It all started on Friday night right after the last freshman got home from class. All of the windows had been taped shut. Every single pane had been covered with thick black plastic that wouldn’t let so much as a sliver of light enter or leave the house “Nothing goes in or out this week-end," Pursell had said. "Not even the sunlight."

The member's had made all of us dress in jeans, a white T-shirt, and tennis shoes just as soon as we got home. The idea was to make us all look the same, but I found little comfort in it.
Mitchell’s spine slipped to the side of mine. It was some ungodly hour on Sunday morning and we were sitting on the thin carpet of the third floor lounge leaning up against each other for support. He caught himself and awakened with a jerk that kept him from falling to the floor. I yawned as he re-positioned himself and wondered if I might fall asleep just like he had. I couldn’t remember being so tired. The tiredness occupied every part of me. We were all so tired that some of us were starting to hallucinate, and maybe that was part of the plan.

Friday night we had the biggest work party in the history of The House. It wasn’t just an ordinary work party. This one went on all night and we scrubbed the whole place from top to bottom. Cougar had made a guest appearance as the house manager, and he was a real bastard about it. Everything had to be perfect. He made us scrub out the spaces between the fins on the radiators with a toothbrush and wax the tile floors in each of the heads one square at a time. The silverware in the kitchen had to be polished, and all the cushions on the couches had to be pulled up and vacuumed on both sides. Everything had to be spit-shined, and none of us could sleep until the whole thing was done. When you finished your job you had to help the next guy until all the work was finished, and that son-of-a-bitch Cougar didn’t sign off on the last job until five AM ... then they woke us up at six.

"Don’t anybody fall asleep!" Crasher shouted from the doorway. "Remember! This is your final test! You will pass or fail as a class."

Mitchell’s back stiffened and he jerked himself upright again. The rest of us looked at Crasher with eyes that were too tired to hate. Saturday had been a blur. I tried to remember just what we had been doing the last twenty hours.

"It’s almost time!" Crasher shouted, as he looked back down the stairway.

I turned my head with the rest of my pledge class toward Crasher. He squinted through his thick glasses with puffy bloodshot eyes. We were too tired to fight it anymore, but I couldn’t help but wonder why the members put up with it. They didn’t have to stay up this late, but a lot of them did. In a way they even seemed to enjoy it. Maybe it was because there were only so many chances. Maybe it was because they knew it wouldn’t last. Maybe they had a sense that it was just a fleeting moment. It would last a few years and then be gone and we would never see anything like it again. The thought of it made me feel empty in the middle of my gut. I wondered if the feelings would still be as strong when I was forty or fifty. Probably not, I decided. It would be a different time with different feelings.

"It’s no wonder the army drafts us when we’re eighteen," I mumbled to myself.

“What did you say?” Mitchell asked.
“I was just thinking about all of those eighteen year old guys in Vietnam,” I said. I knew I was tired and that I probably wasn’t making any sense but I didn’t care so I kept talking. “They wouldn’t be there if they were thirty. They’d just tell the draft board to go fuck itself and then they couldn’t have a war. There wouldn’t be anybody to do the fighting so they’d just have to forget the whole thing. That’s why they draft us when we’re eighteen.”

“What are you talking about?” Mitchell asked.

I didn’t know any other way to explain it to him and it was a good thing I didn’t try, because our conversation was interrupted by the sound of Crasher’s voice. He looked tired too. As a matter of fact the whole room was drunk from sleep deprivation. None of us knew what to expect next

“Stand up!” Crasher said.

We staggered to our feet, the room smelling of sweat and fatigue. We watched as if drugged while Crasher walked toward us.

“This is your final test,” he said, as he reached into a bag and carefully withdrew an egg and held it up for all of us to see.

“This is your brotherhood,” he said. “You need to protect it with your life. This is precious. It can’t be bought or traded or bartered. It has to be earned and shared with the other members of your pledge class. Just like the egg, your brotherhood is fragile. It can be broken and lost with lies or deceit. Only a few people are lucky enough to have one of these eggs. Your job tonight is to protect it. Someone might try to take your brotherhood away. They might try to steal it or break it or trick you into giving it up ... but don’t let them. If you can protect your brotherhood until morning, you stand a chance of passing the test.”

Crasher handed each one of us an egg, and when he finished he walked to the front of the group and lifted up a big cardboard box.

“For the rest of the night you have only one weapon to protect your brotherhood,” he said. He reached into the box and withdrew a wooden paddle. He held it high over his head. It was eighteen inches long and made of pure white pine.

“This is your pledge paddle,” he said. “It represents your entire class. If this class is worthy, like the other classes before it, you will become members.”

Each of us took a paddle.

“Remember!” Crasher said. “No matter what happens during the rest of the night, always protect your brotherhood.” He paused for a moment and then said: “Zeke! Your first.”
We watched Zeke walk to the top of the stairway and wait as Crasher put a blindfold around his head, and in an instant he disappeared down the stairway.

“What now?” Mitchell asked. “What are they going to do next?”

I fought sleep as I tried to think of an answer. I cradled my egg in one hand and gripped the paddle in the other.

“All I know,” I said. “Is that if anybody fucks with my egg, I’ll let ‘em have it.”

The feel of the paddle gave me comfort in my sleep-deprived state. It made me feel a little less helpless.

“Brooks! Your next!” Crasher said, as he re-appeared at the top of the stairs.

I walked to the top of the staircase and listened to Crasher speak into my ear as he applied the blindfold.

“I’m going to take you down the stairs to your guide,” he said. “He’ll take you where you need to go. Don’t speak unless spoken to. Don’t volunteer anything. Only answer the questions you’re asked. Remember to keep your guard up and protect your brotherhood.”

He took me down to the living room and spun me around in a circle six or seven times until I was completely disoriented. He pushed me gently in the middle of the back and I staggered forward.

“Come straight ahead!” someone said. It sounded like Booby’s voice.

I walked toward the voice and the back of my neck tingled as I heard the creak of a door hinge. I held my egg in my left hand and waved the paddle gently from side to side. I was ready to hack anything that threatened my brotherhood. I was down-to-the-bone tired, but felt intensely alive. If anybody fucks with my egg, I thought, I’ll let ‘em have it.

There was a noise and then a rush of air. I jumped to my left and turned with my paddle raised over my head. My heart raced as the sound hummed a little louder for an instant and I felt another rush or air. The sound changed and the air went away. It took me a moment to realize that it was a fan rotating back and forth across my path. It stopped after a few seconds.

“Go straight ahead,” the voice said, and I felt another push in my back.

We turned to our left and went down a set of stairs. I listened to the creaking floor, and decided we must be in the old section. I took the stairs one at a time, slowly reaching the landing and turning left when Booby told me to. We moved forward ten paces before turning left again and stopping.

“Wait here,” Booby said, and then he untied the blindfold.
My eyes adjusted slowly to the sight of two candles burning on top of a small table. There were two faces on the other side. One was Cougar, the other one I was not familiar with.

"Have a seat." the stranger said. He motioned to a hard wooden chair on my side of the table. I sat down, keeping my egg close to my body and laying the paddle across my knees.

The candles illuminated their faces in flickering shadows. I saw the small tag pinned to the shirt of the stranger. I couldn't quite read it yet. I waited for my eyes to adjust to the light.

"Tired Brooks?" the stranger asked.

"Real tired," I said. I was starting to discern the letters on the tag. It said, "I'm Damn Proud I'm a Sigma Tau!"

"Do you still have your brotherhood Brooks?" The stranger asked.

"Yes," I answered. The letters on the nametag were clearer now. I could almost read them.

The stranger extended his right hand across the table and opened it slowly. The hand was huge, the fingers long and strong. "May I see it?" he asked.

I held my egg up, keeping it a safe distance from him. The eyes of the stranger were dark and intense ... strangely familiar. I could finally read the nametag. It said Jerry Kyle.

"See," I said.

The stranger smiled and wiggled his fingertips. "Don't you understand Brooks. I'm a member of this house, and I want you to give me your brotherhood."

"I don't think so," I said. I moved the egg back toward my body and gripped the paddle. I tried again to place the stranger. Cougar spoke for the first time. He extended his hand across the table too. Placing it next to the stranger's with the palm up.

"It's okay Brooks. You can let me have your brotherhood."

I shook my head. "Sorry Cougar. Nobody takes my brotherhood."

Both of them shook their heads. The stranger waved the back of his right hand toward me with a flick of his wrist.

"Take him away," he said to Booby.

I felt the blindfold come over my eyes again, and then Booby cinched it tight in the back of my head and I was in darkness once more.

"Turn around, and go straight ahead," he said.

I felt my spine start to tingle again as I left the safety of the room. I held my brotherhood close to my belly button and started waving the paddle back and forth. It had taken a few moments to place Jerry Kyle. He had been an all-American forward on the university basketball
team when Nick and I were in high school. He was a Sigma Tau alumnus who had tried out for the pros after college but didn’t make it. I didn’t know where he lived or what had become of him. All I knew was that he was here now, trying to talk our pledge class out of their eggs at three o’clock in the morning.

“Turn right and go forward,” Booby said.

We continued through the darkness together. We went up a stairwell, and then down a hallway. There was a whisper and then a touch. There was something soft on my ear and I took a swing with my paddle and hit the wall with a thunk. I heard a chain rattling close by my feet. I took another swing and found only air.

“Down the stairway ... turn right and stop,” Booby said.

We were at another station. There was another strange face with a nametag I didn’t recognize and another trick.

“I can keep your egg for you. It will be safe with me,” the stranger said. “You should always do what the members tell you to do, and I want your egg,” another demanded.

I went through the house in the wee hours of the morning; a sleep deprived maze of real and imagined threats. I protected my egg with my paddle and my wits.

“Straight down the hall,” Booby said. “And be careful.”

I walked slowly, clutching my egg and waving the paddle back and forth in front of me. I’d been through half a dozen stations so far and was starting to wonder if the gauntlet would ever end.

I felt a whoosh of air as someone came close by me and grabbed my wrist. I clutched my egg as tight as I could without breaking it, and took a swing with my paddle hoping to find flesh. I missed and felt the hand on my wrist grope for the egg. I dropped my paddle and tried to cover my egg with both hands.

“Ouch!” the guy holding me said, and I could feel him lose his balance and fall forward. Someone put the paddle back in my hand, and as soon as I got it I took a swing and felt a solid thunk. It was good shot, the first one of the night. I’d finally found something besides air and sheet rock.

“Ouch! Goddamn it!” I heard the guy on the floor say.

I stepped away, still clutching the egg close to my body and took another swing in the direction of the guy on the floor. There was another satisfying thunk as the pine found flesh and bone.

“Shit! Stop! Okay?” the guy on the floor said.
“Eat my shorts Faceman!”

The second voice came from my left side and I recognized it right away as Nick’s. It was he who had re-armed me and allowed me to get a little piece of The Faceman.

“Go forward!” I heard Booby say from behind me. “Your almost home.”

I shuffled forward until I felt Booby’s hands on my shoulders. He turned me gently around.

“Sit down and wait,” he said. “Your brotherhood is safe here.”

I sat down in the chapter room. I knew where I was because the floor beneath my feet felt smooth and the bench I sat on was hard and well worn. I felt the coolness of the cement on my spine as I leaned back. I felt the others too. They were sitting in an enforced silence. They were all around me.

There was a sound in the hallway outside. Thunk! Thunk! Thunk! It was the sound of wood on the wall. There was another voice to my right and above my head.

“Sit here and wait,” the voice said. “You’re safe here.”

I felt another body come close to my right side. His breathing was deep and regular. I wondered if it was Mitchell. I waited in the chapter room, struggling to stay awake; fighting to hang on just a little bit longer and protect my brotherhood. I heard another pledge enter the chapter room, and then another and another. And the warmth in the room grew with each body that entered and it got harder and harder to stay awake.

When I thought I couldn’t bear it any longer a light switch clicked and the other side of the blindfold brightened. Then someone pulled it off, and I squinted with the rest of my pledge brothers into the light. We were all there. Everybody I knew in the house and some other guys I didn’t. I’d never seen so many people in the chapter room at once. Everybody who lived in the house was there, and the others who lived off campus were there too. The graduate students were there, and there were alumni from all over that I’d never seen before. All of them wore nametags proclaiming “I'm Damn Proud I'm a Sigma Tau!”

John Pursell sat on his wooden throne at the front of the room. Mitchell was on my right, his paddle resting across his thighs. It was dented and splintered from the collisions with the hallway wall. He still held his egg in his left hand.

Herbie sat on the other side of Mitchell. His egg was broken. The yolk oozed from his hand onto his lap, but he still gripped what remained of the shell. His face was flushed and his eyes bloodshot. The Faceman sat across the room holding his right shoulder. There was a welt on his forehead too. He looked up and flipped me the bird.
“Pledge class of nineteen seventy two!” Pursell said. “You have all passed the test and you are all to be congratulated. Always remember to protect your brotherhood just like you did tonight. You're the best pledge class we've ever had."

Everybody stood up and started cheering and then I saw Nick walking toward me. He handed me a card with a pin attached to it.

“The number on the back is your pledge number,” he said. “The pledge with the best grades gets the lowest number. Yours is ten thirty five, and it’s the lowest number in your class. I knew you would do it. I wish we could be real brothers, but I guess this is as close as we’ll get.”

I looked at the right hand he extended toward me and ignored it. Instead I put my arms around his shoulders. He was thick and wide and as hard as granite.

“Thanks,” I said. “Thanks for everything.”

He looked startled and maybe even a little embarrassed for a moment. The guys were milling around us and slapping each other on the back and swapping stories about the attempts to kidnap each other’s brotherhood. Pursell smacked the wooden throne with his gavel and we quieted down just enough to hear his voice.

“Steak dinner this afternoon at two o'clock,” he said. “You can sleep this morning ... but before we go to bed lets stay up a little longer and have a beer.”

The chapter room door opened up and Booby rolled in a keg. Moose lifted it up to the bench beside the door and pushed the tap into the top and screwed the spigot into the bottom. Poopsie brought in some cups and somebody fired up the cheap-piece-of-shit stereo and the music echoed through the hallway and into the Chapter Room.

Somebody slapped me on the back as we migrated toward the keg like a herd of cattle at dinnertime. Pursell handed out some felt pens and the paddles started moving around the room and we all signed them. I signed mine with my number, 1035 right beside my name just like the other members did. As the music blared and the beer flowed my mind reeled in the alcohol and the sleep deprivation. The room spun around in laughter and release. I looked at the faces and tried to burn each one into my memory. The year was moving too fast. I wondered if it was the shortness that made it so sweet. We were all on that big river together, and the water was rushing past the bank so fast there was barely enough time to enjoy the scenery. I took another drink of beer and Woody turned up the cheap-piece-of-shit stereo.

*In the days of my youth*
*I was told what it means to be a man*
*Now I've reached that age*
*I've tried to do all those things the best I can* (4)
The weather struggled with itself in late March. Cold winter air kept crawling down from the north at the same time a timid sun made more frequent appearances in a confused sky. As the days got longer and warmer, the swirling gray clouds mixed with currents high above the university and then they tumbled together in confused fronts that needed to blend before they could decide what the weather would be.

A strong wind of change gusted against the windows of The House in late March too, sometimes blowing hard enough to rattle the glass. The sky took turns spitting rain, and then bathing everything in sunlight ... as if the weather couldn't make up it's mind, as if it were switching from one personality to another.

In the TV room Moose and Woody sat beside each other in the senior chairs. Moose rested his Styrofoam coffee cup on his knee. His right lower lip bulged out where the tobacco had been packed in tight. He deliberately lifted his cup and spat dark brown saliva into it. Woody dangled his right leg on the armrest of his chair. He watched Moose spit, and then shook his head in disgust.

"It's no wonder you can't get a date," he said. "That shit will kill you Moose ... it will. You'll get some kind of mouth cancer and have half your face cut off before you die."

Moose smiled with yellow teeth.

"You'll still love me won't you Woody?"

"You gross me out Moose."

Booby, Big Wally, and The Faceman were stuffed into the junior couch. Big Wally had his hands clasped behind his head and his armpit was just inches from The Faceman's nose.

"Jesus Wally! Put your arms down! You stink man!"

Big Wally looked to his left and grinned.

"Eat my shorts Faceman!"

The Faceman tried to move away from the stench.

"Fuck you Wally."

Poopsie farted on the other side of The Faceman.

"Oh no!" The Faceman whined.
"Shut up!" Moose said. He spat in his cup again while Booby waved a magazine like a fan.

"James McCord testified today in Washington D.C. that former attorney general and head of the Nixon re-election committee John Mitchell, knew about the plan to break into the Democratic offices at Watergate." Walter Cronkite said.

Trapper, Herbie, and Mitchell were on the floor with Nick and me. We lay like a pile of pick-up sticks, each one of us trying to find a body part that we could use as a pillow and afford us a better view of the TV.

"What's that mean?" Mitchell asked.

"It means it goes all the way to the top," Moose said. He spat into his cup again. "Sooner or later it's going to work it's way right up to the big guy."

"The Watergate inquiry continues this week as the Publisher of a local newspaper, and ten reporters are subpoenaed to testify," Cronkite said.

Nick lay with his head resting on the left side of Herbie's butt. I'd never known him to pay much attention to the news, but lately he'd been watching.

"What the hell’s going on!" he said. "I can’t make any sense of this!"

"Nixon’s dirty," I said.

"But he’s the president. Why don’t they cut him a little slack?"

"Pull your head out!” Crasher said. "The guy's a crook!"

"But he’s the president!” Nick said again. "This is America, and we're Americans and he’s the president. We should support the president."

"Grow up Nick."

"Ken Norton won a split decision over Muhammad Ali in San Diego. This comes after the recent upset victory by George Forman over Joe Frazier for the heavyweight championship of the world," Cronkite said.

Dudley leaned back in the couch and groaned. He held his forehead as if he had a migraine headache.

"What's the world coming to?" he said. "First the Superfight with Frazier ... and now this. I might as well go kill myself."

"What did you say Dudley?" The Faceman said.

"He said he wants to kill himself," Poopsie said.

"Good!" The Faceman responded. "That would make my life a little less miserable."
"The withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam continues," Cronkite said. "President Nixon has asked that we look toward the positive work ahead, and not become bogged down in Watergate. Government officials claim the Hanoi Hilton, is now empty."

Nick had rolled over onto his belly and now he was resting his elbows on the rug and his chin propped up in the palms of his hands.

"I had a draft number a year ago and it was pretty low," he said. "I guess I would have gone if they'd have drafted me, but they didn't and then I didn't hear anything else about it. Why didn't I get drafted?" he asked me.

"They stopped the involuntary draft," I said. "There was too much pressure on the politicians and they stopped it. You're lucky you didn't have to go."

"But where did the pressure come from?" he asked.

"From students like us mostly," I said.

"I wonder where I would have ended up?" he said. We were both watching the people on the TV screen. They were pushing from every direction at once on a helicopter and it moved across the deck of the carrier as if it were having spastic fits. "How could they have all been so wrong?" he asked. "What about all the guys that went over there and got killed?"

The helicopter slid across the deck in little hops until one of the runners fell off the landing pad. "They didn't know any better," I said. "They were guys just like you and me who believed in their president." The people kept pushing until the helicopter finally toppled off the ship and slid down into the sea.

"Jesus!" Poopsie said.

"It feels like there's too many things changing at once," Nick said. "I wish we could just go back to the good old days. At least I knew what to expect back then. I never seem to know what to expect anymore." The windows rattled again as the wind, and the rain, and the sun and the cold fronts tried to figure out what the weather would be.

"The American League has voted to allow a designated hitter to replace the pitcher in the batting rotation," Cronkite said. "The rule will take effect this season."

"The pitchers are a bunch of pussies," The Faceman said. "It's no wonder they don't want them to bat."

Booby looked at The Faceman in disbelief. "Tell Vida Blue he's a pussy."

"It stinks!" Woody said. "That's not the way baseball is supposed to be played."
Mitchell rolled over on his side and propped his head up with the heel of his right hand. "It's a good thing!" he said. "The pitcher is always an easy out. The designated hitter will put more offense into the game."

"Yeah ... and take away all the strategy." Poopsie said. "The manager will never have to pull the pitcher for a good at bat."

"Federal forces encircled Wounded Knee at the Pine Ridge Sioux Reservation where the American Indian Movement is occupying a church and trading post, holding several people hostage," Cronkite said.

"They need Baretta!" Morris said. "Baretta would clean up that mess." He leaned back on the couch with a far-off look on his face. "Baretta would take care of everything," he said.

"Baretta's the only guy who can handle a situation like that."

Nick kept his chin in the palms of his hands and his eyes on the TV screen.

"Life was a lot simpler in high school," he said. "I didn't know as much as I do now, but I think it was easier that way."

"You're two-o-five and growing," I said. "Things will get back to the way they're supposed to be."

He looked down and made a fist and we both watched the muscles in his arm pop out beneath the skin. He was bigger all right; it was the first time I'd seen him gain weight in two or three years.

"When are you going to call Ashleigh Pierce?" he asked me.

"I've been waiting for a good reason to call," I answered.

"What reason do you need?"

"I've been waiting for the right time, I mean."

"You'd better not wait too long," Nick said. "Word is out that the quarterback is interested in her."

It didn't surprise me. The quarterback always managed to find girls like Ashleigh Pierce sooner or later. The only reason I hadn't called was because I couldn't find the guts to do it. I didn't know if I'd ever find the guts to do it, and I knew I couldn't compete with the quarterback of the football team. Thinking about her made me excited and depressed all at the same time.

" Evil Knievel jumped over fifty two wrecked cars in Los Angeles today after a demolition derby. The jump is believed to be the longest of its type on record," Cronkite said.

The phone rang in the hallway.

"Get the phone frog." The Faceman yelled.
Mitchell, Trapper, Herbie and I all looked at each other, each one of us trying to break the other down. It was the first time the phone had rung since the news started. Somebody had to be first ... but who would it be?

Trapper budged first. He moved just enough for the rest of us to judge it as a sign of weakness and we quickly turned back toward the TV. The phone rang again.

"Get the phone frog," The Faceman screamed again.

Trapper groaned and got up from the floor and disappeared through the door.

"Tonight Bill Walton and Coach John Wooden attempt to lead UCLA to an unprecedented seventh straight NCAA basketball championship when they play Memphis State University in the finals of the NCAA tournament," Cronkite said.

"I'm going to save this seat for the game," Big Wally said.

"Eat my shorts Wally," Moose said. "There'll be sixty guys in here for the game. It's every man for himself. You can't save the seat."

"Maybe I'll just skip dinner and stay right here so I'll be sure to have a seat for the game." He looked at Moose and grinned.

"Be my guest Wally, but we're having steak dinner tonight."

"What's the occasion?"

"Margaret's birthday."

Everybody in the room turned toward Moose.

"No shit!" Wally said. "How old is she?"

"She won't say, but there's a pool. For a buck you can guess her age and the winner gets the pot, but you have to have proof."

"She must be a hundred years old." Wally said.

"I guessed one hundred twenty," Nick said. "She got mad at me and said she was going to get even. Now I've got to watch my back."

"How are we gonna find out how old she is?" Wally asked.

"Baretta could figure it out," Morris said.

"If we can't figure it out by the time it reaches seventy degrees we'll buy a keg with the money," Moose said as he spat into his cup.

Wally nodded. "That makes sense to me."

Trapper was back at the doorway. "Who's Dave Johnson?" he asked.

Poopsie got up from the sophomore couch to answer the phone just as the dinner bell rang. The room jumped at the sound of the chimes. Each guy looked as if he had been prodded
by an electric probe. They ran across the room and bottlenecked at the door, squeezing past one another and squirting out the other side into the living room. Wally stayed in his chair. He looked from the television to the rapidly growing line in front of the dining room door. He bit his lower lip, hesitating for an instant, before jumping up from his chair and racing through the living room to the line of guys now marching into the dining room.

"And that's the way it is," Cronkite said, as he looked into an empty room. "On Tuesday, March twenty seventh, nineteen hundred and seventy three."

A gust of wind and rain and change rattled the windows of The House again, but nobody noticed.

32
Jigger a minute

Nick sat on a straight-backed wooden chair with the rest of the guys in the jigger a minute contest. The tile floor had just been mopped down and the rickety Ping-Pong table had been torn apart and placed against a wall in the corner of the room. Woody was on Nick's right and Big Wally was on his left. Zeke had entered too. He sat on the far end of the line with Herbie, Trapper, and Booby.

They wore a variety of costumes. Some wore gym trunks. Others wore sweat suits, or jeans. Most of them wore a hat. Trapper had a football helmet on without the facemask.

"Just in case I fall on my head," he had said.

There was a keg of beer in front of them and an empty wastebasket with a plastic liner in it. Each contestant looked at a table with a row of small paper cups. Nick's cup sat next to the others with his name scrawled across the top in magic marker. The cups had a horizontal line a third of the way up. Everybody who lived in the house was in the ping pong room. It was Friday night and we had just finished raunch dinner and we were full of anticipation.

John Pursell stepped up to the table. He was bigger than ever, two eighty at least, and every time he walked by he cut the air with a giant wide wedge of rock hard muscle. When he spoke we all listened.

"You know the rules," he said. "The last guy to puke wins the title. You'll be crowned the jigger-a-minute champion and you'll have a reserved place at the head table in the dining room until a new champion is crowned next year. You'll always be the first person served for each and every dinner. You'll never have to worry about the other guys eating all the butter or sour cream
before it gets around to you. For an entire year you won't have to worry about getting enough bread or jelly. It is an honorable title that has been held for the past year by our defending champion Booby."

Booby stood up and doffed his baseball cap and all of the guys who had bet on him started chanting, “Boo-Bee ... Boo-Bee ... Boo-Bee.” Poopsie chanted with the others as he walked in front of the table and filled each of the paper cups to the line with cold foamy beer. By the time he got done pouring, the little translucent cups had two visible levels, a layer of beer at the line on the cup, and a second layer of foam bubbling half way up.

"Dudley! Are you ready with the timer?" Pursell asked

"Ready," Dudley answered.

“What did you say Dudley?” somebody asked.

I moved with the rest of the crowd to a spot close to the contestants.

"Alright," Pursell said. "Let's get started."

Nick sat motionless staring at his cup.

"You're my man Booby," Poopsie said. "I've got five bucks on you to repeat."

Big Wally picked his cup up first and slurped it down after tossing his head back and gargling the beer. He wiped his chin and grinned.

"Shit you guys!" he said. "I can drink a jigger a minute all night!"

"Eat my shorts Wally!" The Faceman said.

Booby was at the far end of the line. As the rest of the guys drank their jigger, Booby looked into the top of his cup and gently swirled the beer in a circle. He waited until the last thirty seconds before pouring it down his throat. He didn't swallow it, he just poured it down, and Nick did the same thing.

I'd done my research on the Jigger a Minute Contest. Historically it had lasted between thirty and sixty minutes. One or two quarts of beer didn't seem like much, certainly not enough to make you puke. But after watching Booby and Nick I realized it wasn't the beer that did it ... it was the foam. Steadily drinking an ounce at a time fills your stomach up with so much foam you can't belch it out fast enough. Eventually you just blow treats to get rid of it. Booby knew it, but it didn't look like anybody else did … except for Nick. The two of them tried to get it down in one smooth swallow. Booby was the champion. Pretenders like Big Wally would fall by the wayside in a hurry, but Nick was a different story.
“I'll put ten dollars on Nick!” I shouted, pulling my wallet out of my pocket and handing the money over to Pursell. I knew Booby would be tough to beat, but I’d never lost money betting on Nick.

Poopsie filled the glasses for the second time and Nick started swirling the beer in his cup again. Big Wally gulped his beer down with a toss of his head while Booby sat at the other end of the line and swirled his beer too. He looked at Nick and winked just as Cougar's voice burst into song from the back of the crowd. We all sang with gusto and toasted the contestants.

Drink Beer!
Drink Beer!
Oh come drink beer with me!

For I don't give a damn
For any old man
Who won't drink beer with me!

Bring out that old golden goblet
With the Sigma Tau upon it
And we'll all have another Keg of Beer!
More Beer!

For it's not for knowledge
That we've come to college
It's to drink beer while we're....
Raise hell while we're....
Get a little while we're here!

I ran upstairs to get Mitchell. He’d been hunched over his biology text all afternoon and as soon as dinner had finished he’d gone right back up to his room. When I got there he had his forehead in his hands and he was groaning. He didn’t even look up when I came in.

“Goddamned Saturday morning lab.” he said.

“It’s your own fault,” I said. “You didn’t register early enough.”

“But I tried to get out of it,” he said. “I tried to trade for a Wednesday morning, but the price was just too steep. I even tried flirting with the girl at the registration desk but that didn’t work either. I got stuck with this fucking lab and now I’m up here while the rest of you guys are having fun downstairs.” He rolled his head back and forth in his hands. “Shit!” he said. “It’s bad enough I’ve got to study on a Friday night, but I’ve also got to put up with that damned Delta outside.” He lifted his head and looked out the window. “He’s not making things any easier. Why
does he have to be doing that shit right now? Why does he have to be doing it on this night? The
lights are bad enough, but the noise is driving me nuts.”

He leaned back in his chair and looked toward the Delta house. I looked with him. A
floodlight shone out from the wall of the house and it cast a long shadow on the patio next door. It
also illuminated Mitchell's window, making us squint as we peered down. The Delta Mitchell had
been talking about was hitting a tennis ball against a concrete wall. We watched as the ball went
from the racquet to the wall over and over again, the thumps were a constant monotony until
finally the Delta missed and there was a pause as he leaned over to pick up the rolling ball. He
immediately dropped it on the concrete and hit it with a forehand, and the whole racket started all
over again.

Mitchell seethed each time the tennis ball struck the wall. He put his hands over his ears
and tried to concentrate.

"I'll never get this done as long as that asshole is out there,” he said. “I'll never finish. I'll
have to stay up here all night, and the keg will be dry by the time I get downstairs.” He pushed his
chair back and opened the window.

"Take it easy Mitchell!” I said, but he paid no attention to me.

"Hey!” he shouted out the window.

The noise stopped and the Delta looked up at us. He was tall and wiry and looked like he
was in good shape. There wasn't an ounce of fat on him as a matter of fact. He held the racquet
in his right hand and the ball in his left. There were cords of hard muscle in both forearms.

"What do you want Sigma Tau!” he shouted back.

"Why don't you knock off for the night?” Mitchell asked. "I'm trying to study up here."

The Delta turned and let the ball bounce once in front of him before smashing it against
the wall.

"Eat me Sigma Tau!” He said. "Why are you studying on a Friday night anyway?"

Mitchell's face flushed. He pushed his chair back to his desk.

"That son-of-a-bitch!” he said. "That dirty rotten son-of-a-bitch!"

He tried to concentrate again through the glaring light and the incessant thump-thump-
thumping. He closed his eyes but it didn't help. He leaned back and opened the window again.

"Take it easy!” I said. "That guy's pretty big.” But he acted as if I wasn't even there.

"Hey Delta!” he shouted. "What kind of an ass-hole doesn't have anything better to do on
a Friday night than stand around on a patio hitting fucking tennis balls against a wall?"

"Screw you Sigma Tau!” The response was immediate and belligerent.
“Maybe we should just forget it and go downstairs,” I said. “You can study in the morning.”
Mitchell looked at me in disbelief. “The labs at seven thirty” he said. “How am I going to study in the morning?”
“Well … ahhh … I guess you could get up at five.”
“Jesus!” he said. “That’s ridiculous! This has got to stop!” He looked back out the window.
“Knock off with the noise dip-shit!” Mitchell shouted. “And turn off your fucking flood light and drag your sorry ass inside!”
We could both see the sneer on the Delta’s face.
“I think I’ll stay here all night!” he shouted back. “I think I’ll leave that floodlight on all night just for you!”
“How about if I come down there and turn it off!” Mitchell shouted back. “How about if I do it right after I shove that tennis racquet up your ass!”
“Jesus!” I said. “You’d better be careful.”
The Delta stopped pounding the tennis ball and it rolled past his feet and he turned and looked back toward Mitchell. I was making a real serious effort to stay away from the window.
“You just try it you piece of shit!” the Delta shouted back. “You Sigma Tau’s make me sick. I’m staying right here! And that light stays on all night until you come down and make me turn it off. I'll kick your ass!”
We both peered down at the Delta. He wore a pair of sweat pants and a T-shirt in the cool air of early March. His body was lean and conditioned. Even from two stories up we could see he was bigger than either one of us.
“He’s bigger than us,” I said. “He’s not only bigger than us, but he’s in better shape too.”
I remembered the only fight I’d ever had. I was in the second grade and it didn’t last very long. When I came home with a fat lip my mother told me to never fight again, and I’d been only too happy to oblige her.
“'I'm no fighter," I whispered to Mitchell.
“I'm not much of one either,” he said. “But that light has to come off. I've got to make that son-of-a-bitch turn the light off." We both looked down at the Delta again.
“Come closer to the window ass-hole!” The Delta shouted. "I want to get a good look at your sorry face."
"Don't worry dip-shit!" Mitchell shouted back. "Stay right where you are, and you'll be seeing my face soon enough! Just as soon as I'm done up here I'll come down there and you'll get to know me real well."

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" I asked Mitchell. He looked surprisingly calm for what was going on. I could feel my heart thumping in my chest and I'd just been watching.

"Don't worry," Mitchell said. "I'll take care of that ass-hole."

"But he's pretty big," I said again.

"It'll be okay," Mitchell said as he turned back toward his textbook. "You go back downstairs and I'll be there in a few minutes. Just as soon as I'm done with this chapter."

I staggered out of his room and felt my head start to ache. I walked down the hall and into the room in the new section that I shared with Nick.

Each room in the house was different. The older rooms were small for sure, but the room that Nick and I got stuck with after the first semester was completely cramped. There were two desks built into the east and west walls, with a built in closet right next to the desks. There was a door to the closet that swung out and built-in drawers at the bottom. A strip of carpet ran down the center of the room that was about three feet wide and an eighth of an inch thick. It had the consistency of sandpaper. A single window allowed light into the room through the north wall. The room was so small that the two of us had to turn sideways when we moved past each other. Some of it was just because of the bigness of Nick, his body was getting thicker almost every day.

I opened the closet door and pulled my shaving kit from the shelf in the closet and looked for an aspirin. I found the plastic bottle but realized it was empty even before I got the lid off. I threw the empty bottle into the wastebasket and replaced the shaving kit before closing the door of my closet and opening Nick's. The room was so small, only one door could be opened at a time.

I unzipped Nick's light brown shaving kit and looked inside. I found the aspirin right away, but there was another bottle in there too. It was a brown plastic container with a white plastic top that looked like a prescription bottle.

I turned it over and looked at the label. There was no pharmacy listed and the words were not typed; they were scrawled in black ballpoint ink that said Dianabol. It was an alcohol, just like the one's we'd learned about in organic chemistry. It was a sterol to be exact, an androgenic steroid.
I kept two aspirin and put everything else back into the shaving kit just like I’d found it. By the time I got back downstairs they were up to jigger number forty-four … just under four beers apiece.

Wally had been the first to go. That big shit-eating grin of his had disappeared at jigger number fifteen. At number seventeen he’d blown a stream of beer foam into the wastebasket and that was it for him. Herbie had followed shortly after that, and then Zeke, Trapper, and finally Woody had puked at jigger number thirty-six. Now it was just Nick and Booby.

Booby looked strong as he calmly swirled his paper cup. The cheap-piece-of-shit stereo was blaring out an unrecognizable song, and the betting action had increased. Booby was a three-to-one favorite.

"Thirty seconds!" Dudley said.

"What did you say Dudley?" The Faceman asked.

"Twenty five seconds!" Dudley said.

Nick drank his beer. It slid down and mixed with the rest of the swill in his gut and then it started to churn. His face looked a little sour and then I saw him swallow again. He tried to burp, but part of the beer foam worked it's way higher and he gagged. He swallowed again ... and I knew it was over. Booby watched with a smile as Nick turned toward the wastebasket and came off the chair. The mixture of foam and beer shot out of his mouth, forming a perfect arch toward the trashcan. Before the beer hit the bottom of the can Booby was standing up with his arms extended over his head. He calmly drank his jigger and the contest was over. Nick rested his hands on his knees and steadied himself over the top of the wastebasket as the chanting started.

"Boo-bee! Boo-bee! Boo-bee!"

I heard Pursell’s voice above the crowd.

"The winner and still champion."

"Boo-bee! Boo-bee! Boo-bee!"

Nick wavered over the top of the wastebasket and spit a long glob of slobber into the can. "Boo-bee! Boo-bee! Boo-bee!" The whole room was chanting now. It was the first time I’d ever seen Nick lose a contest of any kind. I walked over and put my hand on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry you lost your bet," he said.

"It was only ten bucks," I reassured him.

"I'm sorry I let you down," he continued. "But Booby was just too good. I've never seen anybody who can drink beer like that."
“It’s okay,” I said. “It wasn’t your day.”

“Thanks Brooks.”

He stared down into the foam-filled wastebasket and spit one last time. I wondered if I should ask him about the Dianabol, but before I could say anything Mitchell walked into the room. To my surprise he looked as though he hadn’t a care in the world. I wondered if maybe the scene between him and the Delta had been a dream. I left Nick straddling the wastebasket and followed Mitchell who walked straight toward John Pursell.

"John," he said. "I’ve got something I need to tell you."

Pursell lowered his beer mug and looked down at Mitchell. "What's up?" he asked.

"There's a Delta out on the patio who's playing tennis with a flood light pointed right into our house. He said he'd kick the ass of any Sigma Tau who tried to make him turn it off. I tried to reason with the guy John, I really did, but he said he was gonna leave the light on all night, and any Sigma Tau who didn’t like it could go fuck himself. I just thought you might want to know about it, you being the president and all."

Pursell squeezed his beer mug until his knuckles turned white. I wondered if he would break it. His hands were as big as baseball mitts, and his body was as big as a barn door and as hard as boilerplate. We all jumped back a little bit when he slammed his beer mug down on top of the table. The beer erupted from the top of the mug like a volcano, and the paper cups that had been left over from the contest jumped from the impact and rolled on their sides until they fell to the floor.

Pursell wiped his lip with the back of his massive right hand. "It sounds like I'd better go have myself a talk with that Delta," he said.

He turned and walked out of the room and Mitchell and I followed him. By the time we'd reached the front door Pursell was already out on the patio glaring down at the Delta who had dropped both his racket and his ball and was backpedaling toward the light switch.

"I didn’t know it was you in the window!" he said.

"Turn off the light," Pursell responded.

"Nobody told me it was you," the Delta objected as he continued to retreat toward the back door of his house.

"Don’t ever turn that light on again," Pursell said, and the Delta looked like he might shit his pants.

For the moment, I forgot about the Dianabol.
The big river pushed gigantic volumes of dark brown muddy water downstream. The runoff from the mountains had flooded over the banks and cut some of the soft soil away from the bluffs. Sometimes dirt clods as big as boulders were swept away by the water. The river looked fat this time of year, and it acted as if it were in a hurry. The water downstream just couldn't get out of the way fast enough. No matter how much water it moved away there always seemed to be even more rushing down from upstream to replace it. The rain filled the river too. The raindrops joined the river in a thick, muddy roller-coaster ride to the Pacific.

Meanwhile the snow pack at eight thousand feet lay dormant. It would have to wait a few more months before having its turn to join the river in the warm months of early summer.

“I gotta go!” Morris shouted for the second time.

“Roll over on your back!” Nick shouted back at him. “Maybe that will take some of the pressure off.”

“But I really mean it!” Morris moaned. “That fucking Trapper! Why doesn’t he stop?”

Morris, Nick, and I were in the back of Trapper’s pick-up truck with Dudley, Herbie, Zeke, and Big Wally. We looked like sardines in a can while Poopsie and Trapper sprawled out like a couple of lizards on a flat hot rock up in the cab of the truck. Nick and I had decided to leave The Big Dodge in the parking lot of the Sigma Tau house during Spring Break and accept a ride on Trapper’s “Cross-State Express.” He was willing to take anybody brave enough to face the elements in the back of his pick-up truck and drop them off in their hometown. After Spring Break was over, he’d come by and pick you up. He didn't mind the inconvenience because the riders paid for the gas. All Trapper had to do was drive. It was his truck and he made the rules.

Whatever he said was law, and he liked it that way.

We were huddled in the back of the truck in our parkas and sleeping bags trying to stay warm as we went over the mountain pass in the middle of the state. The front end of the truck rammed right through the cool wet air at seventy miles an hour and made a rain shadow for all of us in the back. We’d managed to stay dry as long as we kept moving and stayed within two feet of the bed of the truck. But every time our heads went up too high a blast of cold wet air slammed into out foreheads and forced us to instinctively dive down under the turbulence. We’d all managed to stay pretty comfortable until Morris started bitching about having to take a leak.
He was in big trouble too, because one of Trapper’s rules was that there were no stops once his big truck started rolling.

“I’ve got to go!” Morris said again. “I really mean it!”

He’d been trying to get Trapper’s attention through the back window without any luck.

“Hey Brooks!” Morris shouted. “Have a look and check the fuel gauge. Maybe he’ll have to stop soon.”

“But we filled the tank up just before we left,” I said.

“Just have a look anyway will you?”

I moved my head up along the back of the cab. Each inch of elevation brought a noticeable increase in the wind chill factor. I peeked through the back window and then dropped my head back down into my bag as soon as I could.

“It’s three quarters full,” I shouted.

“Awwww Jesus!” Morris cried, as he rocked back and forth on his back with his knees pulled up toward his chest. “I’m gonna burst pretty soon.”

“Just get out of the bag and pee.” Nick shouted.

Morris gritted his teeth and unzipped the bag. The cold moist air whirled around his face as he crawled toward us and propped himself up on one elbow and banged on the rear window with his fist.

“Hey Poopsie!” He yelled. The words drifted away with the wind so quickly my ears could barely catch them. “Tell Trapper I need to pee!”

There was a short pause and then Morris yelled “What?” and then the wind swept the rest of the sentence away. I couldn’t stand it any longer so I moved my head up through the climatic zones and looked through the back window with Morris. Poopsie was shaking his head and pointing over the side of the truck. He leaned back and made a downward motion near the fly of his pants and then pointed with his index finger out the window.

“What?” Morris screamed again.

“He wants you to pee over the edge of the truck.” I told him, but Morris’ eyes never left the inside of the cab.

“You’re shitting me!” he shouted at the two of them. But Poopsie just shrugged his shoulders and turned away.

We both turned and looked off the ass end of the truck. The black asphalt moved away from us in a rush. It looked cold, and wet, and hard as hell. A guy who ended up taking a tumble
off the back of the truck on the pass wouldn’t have to worry about his final exams anymore, that’s
for sure. He wouldn’t ever have to worry about taking a leak again either.

“What would Baretta do?” I asked Morris, but he didn’t think it was very funny at all.

“Baretta wouldn’t have to put up with this shit!” He shouted back. “Baretta would get
these bastards to stop.” He moved back down into his sleeping bag and zipped it all the way up
to his chin. “I can hold it,” he said. “Baretta could hold it if he had to. If he can do it, I can do it too.
To hell with those two bastards!” he said, and then his head disappeared into his sleeping bag.

I moved back down into my bag and noticed Nick watching the whole show with
amusement. I thought it was as good a chance as I would get.

“I know about the Dianabol,” I said.

“What?”

“I found the Dianabol in your shaving kit. I was just looking for an aspirin so don’t get mad.
It was an accident.”

He didn’t say a word.

“I’ve been reading about that stuff,” I continued. “And it’s not good for you. It can make you
balls shrivel up like raisins, and it can make you sterile ... some people think it might even cause
cancer. It can change your personality too, and screw up your endocrine system. Nobody knows
what can happen if you take it for a long time.”

He still didn’t answer right away. He just kept looking at me as the wind blew off the cab
of the truck and swirled over our heads.

“It helps me to get bigger,” he said finally. “I need to get bigger so they’ll notice me during
spring ball. It’ll give me a chance to play. All I need is a chance.”

The truck hit a pothole and our bodies jumped three inches off the bed of the truck. Morris
moaned from inside his sleeping bag.

“It’s not worth it,” I said, as I checked to make sure the zipper of my sleeping bag was
pulled all the way up to my chin. “You shouldn’t be taking that stuff. You can still lift the weights
and get bigger without it. You’re the best. The coaches just haven’t figured it out yet. You can
make it on your own. I know you can.”

“But I can’t stop,” he said. “If I stop I’ll lose everything I’ve gained so far. If I lose the weight
I’ve put on, I may not make the team. I might even lose my scholarship and my dad would kill
me.”

“You should trust me and stop taking it,” I said. “The people that care about you don’t care
if you play football. I don’t, and I bet Leslie doesn’t either.”
"It's not that easy," he said. "It matters to me."

"Just stop the Dianabol," I said.

We were half way down the pass and Morris was starting to wiggle around in his sleeping bag again and finally his head popped out and he unzipped the bag and crawled back over to the window of the truck. He pounded on the glass with his fist.

"I've got to pee Trapper! I'm not kidding! I've really got to go."

The back window of the truck opened and I heard Poopsie’s voice fly over the top of my head at seventy miles an hour.

"Over the side." He said. "Piss over the side of the truck."

"Jesus!" Morris said as he collapsed against the back of the cab. “That’s impossible … isn’t it?” he was looking at the wet asphalt rushing out from the back of the truck again. “How am I going to pee off this truck?”

Big Wally was looking at him now from his sleeping bag, smiling like a Cheshire cat.

"What's the matter Morris," he shouted. “ ... gotta go?"

"Eat my shorts!" Morris shouted back. “Eat my shorts … you bastard!"

"No need to get mad Morris! Just don't get any on me!" Wally said, as he disappeared back into his sleeping bag.

Morris shuddered and the goose bumps bulged out on his arms. "Jesus it's cold!" he said, as he crawled toward the edge of the bed of the truck. He planted one of his knees in the middle of Wally's back on the way over.

"Watch it Morris!" The words barely found their way out of the end of Wally’s sleeping bag.

Morris leaned down and shouted toward the top of Wally’s head. "Fuck you Wally!"

He staggered to the side of the truck on his knees. He reached down to his fly and began the laborious process of finding his dick. His jeans were the kind with the fly made of riveted buttons, so he had to let go of the edge of the truck to get those undone. He wavered in the wind as the truck went around a bend in the road. He moved his left foot up and planted it on the bed of the truck, kicking Herbie in the thigh.

"Watch it Morris!"

"Eat my shorts Herbie! I'm tryin' to pee here!"

Herbie wiggled further down into his bag. "Don't get any on me!" he shouted back. "There's a lot of wind out there!" and then his head disappeared into his sleeping bag.
Morris went back to the process of finding his dick. Getting the buttons undone was much harder with his leg up like that, but finally he managed to work his way through the denim and get started on the long johns. His right index finger was digging deep into the fly of his pants, searching for the overlapping flap of his long underwear. He must have forgotten about the T-shirt because he had to lift that up and probe even deeper to get through the long johns. He was already up to the knuckle of his index finger and still hadn't found skin. He was digging at the flap of his boxer shorts with an index finger that had disappeared into his clothing and still hadn't found his dick.

What would Baretta do? If he'd had a dick as big as Woody's, he could have just reeled that thing out and thrown it over the side of the truck. He wouldn't even have had to get out of his bag. But right now Morris was so cold and shrunken and little, that he'd be lucky to find it let alone get it past the fly of his jeans. He looked at the side of the truck and then back down at the fly of his pants. The truck bed was too high to pee from his knees. He tried to lift himself up. He squatted on his haunches to get himself high enough to pee over the edge... but it was no good. His butt came back as he squatted, and his fly hung directly over the top of Herbie's sleeping bag. He looked like he might be tempted to just turn loose... but it was no good. The end of his dick hadn't cleared his pants and he'd pee all over himself and Herbie too. He'd have to stand up.

He left the fly of his pants open with his dick still lost somewhere in there behind all those layers of clothing. I could almost feel the cold air passing through the open fly and making his dick even smaller, shriveling it up into a little nubbin surrounded by pubic hair. It'll be even harder to get it out now, I thought.

He staggered to his feet, kicking Herbie again, and there was a muffled cry from inside the sleeping bag.

"Fuck you Herbie!" Morris yelled. He was starting to look and sound pretty desperate.

He stood up slowly, steadying himself on the moving truck bed filled with bodies and sleeping bags. His head rose above the top of the cab and the wind hit him like a sledgehammer. His head came down instinctively. He waddled across the truck bed, duck-walking with his head held down below the cab. His fly was still open. He reached for the antennae on the right side of the cab and grabbed it on the third try. He clung to it with his left hand and slowly raised his body back up into the wind.

"Damn it! That's cold!" He shouted, as his right index finger disappeared again into his fly. He started the whole process of maneuvering past the long johns and under the T-shirt and through the boxers until I could tell by the look on his face that he'd struck pay dirt. It was much
more difficult having only one hand to work with but he didn’t dare let go of the antennae. He’d disappear from the bed of the truck and go bouncing out of sight down that long stretch of cold hard asphalt behind us. He’d just started to pull his dick out when the horn honked. We both looked through the window to see Trigger waving his right hand wildly. He was yelling something.

“What now?” I heard Morris say as he watched Poopsie roll down the passenger’s window.

“Off the back!” The words were almost lost in the wind. "Trapper wants you to pee off the back. He’s afraid you'll get some on the side of his truck. If you want a ride back to school, you'll have to pee off the back."

“But I've really got to go!"

Poopsie shrugged. “Hang that little water pistol off the back of the truck if you want a ride back to school.”

Morris let go of the tip of his dick and it sprang back beneath the four layers of clothing. He shouted an obscenity into the sky that no one heard. It was lost in the wind the instant it left his lips. I wondered what Baretta would do.

“Tell me about this place Juilliard,” Nick said, as we both watched the show unfolding before us. He took me completely by surprise.

“Why do you want to know about Juilliard?” I asked.

“I saw the letters from there on your desk last semester. I want you to tell me about it.”

The sound of the word had made my heart skip a beat. It didn’t surprise me he knew about it. I’d probably talked about it in my sleep too.

“I just wanted to get a letter from them,” I said. “I just wanted to get a little piece of their stationary, that’s all.”

“You still haven’t told me about it,” he said.

“It's a music school,” I said. “It's a music school in New York City, and some of the best musicians in the world go there. But it's hard to get into.”

He looked down and rubbed the knuckles of his left hand into the palm of his right. "New York City?" he said. “Why do you want to go to New York City? There are too many people in New York City. There are too many cars and too much noise. You don't want to go to New York City.... do you?"

“Maybe it's not so bad,” I said. “How do you know unless you try it? Maybe there's a reason so many people live there. Maybe it's fun.”

“So what did they say to you in this letter? The letter you got from The Juilliard School.”
For some reason I found myself being careful about how I answered him.

"They said if I want to go there, I have to send in an application. You know ... grades and references and a tape."

"A tape? You mean a tape of your music? Have you done that?"

I shook my head when he asked.

"No, I haven't done anything like that," I said. "It's late in the year. They told me the chances were slim because it's so late. The whole thing is just a lark. I probably couldn't get in anyway. But it's fun to think about." I wiggled deeper into my sleeping bag and checked to make sure the zipper was pulled all the way up. "I'd like to try it though," I said. "I'd like to apply just to see if I could get in. I'd like to see if I'm good enough."

Morris was staggering toward the back of the truck. He stepped on Dudley's thigh and fell. Dudley's head popped out of the bag.

"Watch it Morris!"

"What did you say Dudley?"

"I said watch it Morris."

Morris grabbed Dudley, shaking him by the shoulders.

"Hey Dudley! Do you have a tin can? A pop can or a beer can or anything I can pee in."

"Sorry Morris," Dudley said. "I don't have anything like that." His head disappeared into his sleeping bag.

Morris shouted to all of us in the back of the truck. His words were desperate. "Does anybody have a can I can pee in?" He started to shake each of our bags one at a time. "Come on!" he said. "It's an emergency!"

All of us stayed hunkered down in our sleeping bags. Suddenly Herbie's head popped out of his bag.

"Hang it off the back Morris! I'll hold onto your belt!"

Morris looked almost ready to cry in gratitude.

"Thanks Herbie! Thanks alot!"

Morris crawled to the back of the truck and grabbed the top of the rear gate. Herbie extended his arm out of his bag and slid toward the back of the truck. Morris stood into the wind slowly and Herbie grabbed his belt, but the wind was vicious up there at higher altitude. Morris looked down. The asphalt raced away from him like a deadly black serpent. He raised his head and his finger disappeared again into the fly of his pants.

"Wait a minute Morris!" Herbie shouted.
"What now!" Morris shouted back as he turned his head toward Herbie.

"There's a lot of wind out here," Herbie shouted. "I'm afraid I'll get sprayed! But I've got an idea."

Herbie took off his own belt and looped it through Morris's. He backed up with Morris tethered on the two belts, now a safe distance away. Herbie hunkered down in his sleeping bag with just his arm extending out.

"Okay! Now try it!" he shouted through the small opening in his sleeping bag.

Morris dug back into his fly. He lifted his tee shirt up, dug through the long johns and the boxers until he found his dick and then started pulling frantically to get it into the open breeze. He glanced down at the highway and then back toward Herbie.

“How strong is your belt?”

“Strong enough I think,” Herbie answered.

“Hey Morris,” Nick shouted. It was the first time he had contributed to the situation.

“What?” Morris asked.

“There’s a car right behind us.”

Morris looked back off the end of the truck at a car full of Kappa Pi Beta's coming home from spring break. I sat up and stared with Morris and Herbie and Nick at the faces of the girls behind the windshield as they turned their lights on and off and honked the horn. Morris let go of his pecker and it snapped back into his pants again.

"Shit!" I heard him say.

He dropped to the bed of the truck, pulling Herbie sideways until they were both wedged against the tailgate. He looked like he was ready to cry. Herbie still hadn't let go of the belt.

"What would Baretta do?" Morris screamed. “What would he do?”

Herbie let go of the belt and Morris rolled over to his belly and that's when he saw it, the small crack between the tailgate and the bed of the truck. It was a small opening all right, but maybe it was big enough. It had to be big enough.

Morris wiggled his body down into the corner of the tailgate. He dug frantically into the fly of his pants with both hands and aimed his dick toward the opening at the bottom of the tailgate and let go.

"Ahhhhhh! Oh Jesus! Thank God!"

Herbie wiggled away from the back of the truck

"Hey Morris! Are you all right?" he asked.

“Ahhhh! I'm okay now. I'm finally okay.”
The car full of Kappa Pi Betas backed off a little bit and turned on their windshield wipers. I moved back into my sleeping bag. Morris kept moaning without any signs of letting up. I waited for my body to warm up inside the bag, watching the gray sky from the bottom of the truck bed.

"Are you going to send your application to the Juilliard School?" Nick asked me.

"I haven't though about it," I lied.

"Do you think you'd like to go school there? Do you want to leave the university and live in New York City and go to Juilliard?"

I couldn't help but pause and consider the question. "I don't know," I said. "I like the university just fine. But I wonder sometimes about a place like Juilliard. I really do."

There was a long pause as we listened to Morris moan and pee.

"Don't go to school in New York City," Nick said finally. His voice seemed to waver like the wind passing over our heads. "If you promise not to go to school in New York City, I'll stop taking the Dianabol. If you stay at the university I'll stop. I'll keep lifting weights and turn out for spring ball. We'll live together at the house and everything will be just like it's always been."

I considered the deal for only an instant, but I waited a few seconds before I answered.

"Okay Nick," I said. "It's a deal."

It was no decision at all really. Even though I knew I might have a chance of getting in, I also knew I could never leave him. I'd known him every day of my whole life. He'd been there ever since the first day I could remember, and he'd be there until the last. We may as well have been attached at the hip. Juilliard was just a dream anyway. I wasn't giving up anything really, and it would get him off the steroids, so it was an easy decision.

I looked up at the gray sky again and thought about The Big River. We'd be coming up along side of it soon. It would be traveling down the East Side of the mountains getting bigger just like it had every spring since the beginning of time. It was one of the few things I could think of that never seemed to change.

34
Seventy Degree Kegger

I sat on the back porch with Booby and Crasher. The late-April sun was beating down on us and slowly melting the goosebumps that had formed from the morning’s chill. The two of them looked intently at the thermometer that was mounted on the corner of the house.

"What do you think?" Booby said. "Maybe we should move it into the sunlight."
Crasher looked at Booby, his eyes squinting behind his thick glasses. "That would be cheating!" he said. "It's got to be in the shade. It wouldn't be right to put it in the sun."

Booby looked impatiently at his watch for what must have been the hundredth time as he twisted the end of his mustache. "But it's only eleven thirty," he said. "It's a sure thing. Why don't we just call it now?"

Crasher leaned back in his lawn chair. He placed his hands behind his head and looked up at the sky. It was an especially deep shade of blue this time of year, with a bright sun and just a few scattered white clouds.

"No need to be in such a hurry Booby," he said. "We have to wait. It's tradition, so just sit back and enjoy it. Anticipation is always the best part of everything. Just think about how much fun it will be."

Booby fidgeted in his chair. "It seems stupid," he said. "We could be getting a head start."

"Just another thirty minutes," Crasher said with a smile. "We only need another couple of degrees. We're going to make it for sure."

"Okay," Booby said. "But shouldn't we start collecting now?"

Crasher shook his head. "We can't start collecting until we call it." He looked up at the sky again. "Everything's perfect," he said. "Except I haven't seen Nick yet. We can't start without him."

"He's in the dining room," I said.

"What's he doing there?"

"Playing cards with Margaret and some of the guys."

Crasher seemed to lose interest in the sky. "Is Maxwell with them?" he asked.

"I think so," I said.

"Why don't you check it out," Crasher said. "Maxwell is trying to figure out how old Margaret is. If he does, we're screwed out of the money for the first keg."

I got up and walked through the back door and down the hallway toward the dining room. I could see Margaret at the table. She was hunkered down behind her cards, holding them close to her nose like she always did. Her eyes glanced over the top of her hand for an instant when I came in. She winked and then quickly put her game face back on.

She wore a printed cotton shirt and a pair of brown polyester stretch pants. There were stirrups on the bottom of her pants that hooked over her white cotton socks and disappeared into a pair of light blue tennis shoes. A bottle of Jack Daniels rested on the table beside a half-filled Styrofoam cup. Her eyes danced behind her swooping pink-framed glasses. They were viper's
eyes, looking for an unsuspecting sucker to sink her fangs into. There had been a lull in the card action during the winter. But now, with the days getting longer and warmer and the school year getting shorter, she was starting to find a little more interest from some of the boys. There were always a few fresh pigeons to pluck in the spring. Today was a good day for pigeons, she must have thought, as she scanned her prey.

The Faceman sat straight across from her. He'd been a regular a year ago, but after the fleecing he's taken last spring, he'd disappeared for awhile. He must have forgotten about the forty bucks that Margaret had taken from him back then, because he was back for more now. He fidgeted with his cards and then reached up and ran his hand through his hair, patting it gently to make sure everything was in place. Margaret noticed it and a small smile crossed her lips. That was one of The Faceman's reads. He always checked his hair when he felt good about himself.

Big Wally sat next to The Faceman. He absent-mindedly looked out the window with a big shit-eating grin all over his face. Margaret didn't have much to worry about when it came to Big Wally. He always played until he lost ten bucks and then he quit. Sometimes that didn't take very long.

“Enjoying the nice weather Wally?” Margaret asked him?
He jumped at the question, passing suddenly out of his daydream.
“Yeah … sure,” he said.
“Well just relax and enjoy the weather while your money disappears,” she said. “It's less painful that way.”
Big Wally just grinned and looked back out the window.
“Eat my shorts Margaret,” he said.

Scott Maxwell was at the end of the table. He looked out of place in this scene as he bit his lower lip and looked over his cards. He was a greenhorn who didn't know a good hand from a bad one, but he seemed willing to pay just to hang around and talk to Margaret. She didn't seem to mind as long as he kept contributing to the pot and eventually to her purse. But whatever she took from him she earned. He kept asking her one question after another, and she seemed happy to oblige as long as he had some money left.

Nick was on her left. He leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table. He held his hand close to his nose, just like Margaret did, and he moved the cards around within the hand just like she did too. That was the place she needed to keep most of her attention. Nick was the only one of the bunch capable of taking her money.

“Hey Margaret!” Maxwell said. “Where were you during the war?”
She glared back at Maxwell, irritated with the interruption. Her hair was held in place with a brown hair net, the gray strands swirling around in a tangled clump on the top of her head.

“God damn it Maxwell!” she said. “What are you talking about?"

“I was just asking, that’s all.”

“Asking about what?”

“The war.”

“What war Goddamn it!”


She answered the question without bothering to take the cigarette from her lips. The ash on the end of it bounced and gyrated wildly but stayed put.

“I was just like everybody else during the war.” She said. "I was in a factory on the East Coast working my ass off so the soldiers could have clothes." She shook her head and looked back at her cards, trying to regain her concentration.

“How about World War I?” Maxwell asked. “Do you remember much about World War I.” Margaret looked up again. She let her elbows rest on the tabletop and the flesh of her forearms drooped off the bones. The skin was wrinkled, and dark brown scaly moles competed for space with small intensely crimson liver spots. The cigarette hung down out of her mouth, and a long curling black hair grew out of a big mole on her chin. It twisted around twice before it stopped right beneath the ash of the cigarette. This time the viper’s eyes were replaced for an instant by the soft eyes of a sentimental old woman.

“I was just a young girl living with my parents in a small town in north Idaho,” she said. “We didn't have much in those days, but we got by. I don't remember much about the war. I don't think anybody really understood it. All I remember is that my father went away to France and never came back. It was a stupid war. It took away my father and ruined my life. It was just a stupid Goddamn war like all the others. It was as bad as Vietnam. Someday you'll know what I mean.”

The smoke from Margaret’s cigarette curled slowly in front of her face and nobody moved until Nick said.

"I'm sorry about your dad Margaret. I think our war is stupid too.”

The old woman looked back at Nick.

"It's history," she said. "Let's play cards.”
Maxwell anted another nickel. The pile in front of him just kept getting smaller and smaller. It was a relentless unstoppable flow of nickels, dimes, and quarters from his pile to Margaret's, but he didn't seem to mind.

"Does a full house beat a straight?" he asked. "I can never remember."

"No! Maxwell, No! Goddamn it!" The Faceman said. "For the last time. A straight beats a full house."

Everybody moaned at Maxwell's stupidity. They had been taking him for a sucker all along. They probably thought he would lose five or ten bucks and then be gone, but he had a bigger payday in mind. Margaret's age was still unknown, and the money in the pot remained unclaimed. Nobody had been able to substantiate the number and Maxwell intended to do it today. He had her guard down. While she concentrated on slowly taking his money away from him Maxwell was systematically extracting her age, but he was working against a thermometer instead of a clock.

"Do you remember the San Francisco earthquake Margaret?" He asked her.
She impatiently flicked her ashes onto the blue plastic dinner plate.

"Of course I do Maxwell! Everybody knew about that! It was big news in my day." She shook her head and bid fifteen cents. She glanced at The Faceman who patted his hair again.

Maxwell reached into his pile and flipped a dime and nickel into the pot. "Well, what do you remember about it? Were you in school when you heard about it or did your parents tell you? Was it in the newspapers?"

"What's with you Maxwell?" Margaret asked absently. "Do you need a history lesson or something?" She glanced at the dwindling pile of coins in front of him. "You should pay more attention to your poker. That's the most important lesson I can give you today Maxwell. Pay more attention to your poker."

I tried to suppress my smile. Maxwell had started working on her right after breakfast. During the first hand he'd managed to figure out that she wasn't alive when the Rough Riders landed in Cuba. He'd also deciphered she wasn't alive when the Boer War started. But she'd remembered when the first model T was made, and now the San Francisco Earthquake. She was just a little girl at the time. I tried to imagine Margaret as a little girl in a bright-colored dress with bows in her hair. I couldn't make it work. But I had to hand it to Maxwell. He was patiently getting the facts out of her, and even though I knew a keg of beer hung in the balance, I couldn't help but enjoy watching him do it. He asked for two more cards and threw another nickel into the pot.
She was born somewhere between 1900 and 1905, probably during the earlier part of that period. Maxwell was moving in for the kill, tightening the noose. It was costing him up front to stay in the game, but the payday would more than make up for it. It wasn't just the money Maxwell was after; it was also the fame that came with deciphering Margaret's age. The guy who did that would become a permanent part of Sigma Tau legend.

"Maxwell! Margaret barked. "It's a quarter to you! Pull your head out and pay up!"

Maxwell looked up to a group of expectant eyes; his mind was on a different pot of money than the one in front of him.

"Oh! Sorry Margaret," he said. He laid his cards on the table face down. "I fold."

Margaret turned toward The Faceman. Her viper-eyes looked almost yellow with anticipation.

"A quarter to you Faceman."

The Faceman pushed seventy-five cents toward the pot. "I'll raise you fifty cents," he said.

Her eyes gleamed as she looked at the pot.

"Hey Margaret," Maxwell asked. "Do you remember when the Wright brothers made their first flight?"

"Not now Maxwell! I'm concentrating!"

I left the dining room to report back to Booby and Crasher. There was no need for them to know what Maxwell was up to. They'd want to sabotage it for sure and I didn't think it would be fair.

On the back porch Booby was still squirming uncontrollably in his chair. He looked from the thermometer to his watch and then back to Crasher in a continuous cycle.

"How can you stand it?" he said to Crasher. "How can you just sit there and watch that thermometer? It's almost time! I think we should call it and go get the money and send somebody downtown."

"We're only at sixty eight degrees." Crasher said.

"But we'll need to call the Kappa Pi Beta's. We'll want to let the Sigma Phi's know, and the Gamma's and the Alpha Pi's too."

Booby could barely contain himself; he was wiggling around on his chair like he needed to pee. "And where are we going to put the keg?" he asked. "Have you thought about that?"

"Same place as always," Crasher answered. "In the alley right by the back door."

"But what if the Tau Omega's come over?"
"They can drink as long as they pay," Crasher answered. "The girls are free of course." His eyes crinkled as he smiled behind his glasses. "There'll be plenty of girls," he continued dreamily. "There's always plenty of girls at the seventy degree kegger. They can smell free beer like a shark smells blood. As soon as the thermometer hits seventy, they'll be heading our way."

Booby rocked back and forth in his chair, his knees pumping up and down and his feet twitching convulsively.

"How much longer Crasher? What's the temperature now?"

"We're on the high side of sixty eight. Just be patient and it'll happen."

Crasher looked over his shoulder into the old section of the house. "How's Nick doing?"

He asked me. "Is he still playing cards?"

"Yup," I answered.

"Good," Crasher said. "I'd hate to start without Nick."

I turned around and made a beeline back to the dining room.

"Do you remember when Teddy Roosevelt became president?" Maxwell asked Margaret just as I came through the door.

She moved a card to the inside of her hand. She looked at the pot and then at The Faceman.

"You think the full house will do it don't you?" She asked him.

The Faceman's head jerked up suddenly as Margaret glared at him from behind her glasses.

"This flush of mine is looking pretty good," she continued. "All the little red hearts are lined up side by side. They look beautiful! Just beautiful!"

"Hey Margaret! What about Roosevelt? Theodore Roosevelt? Do you remember when he was elected?"

"Shut up Maxwell!"

"Come on Margaret. I'm just trying to make conversation. I thought you might remember."

"Well ... make a little less conversation," Margaret said. "It's a quarter to you Wally."

Wally flipped his quarter into the pot and looked out the window. "I wonder what the temperature is?" He said.

"It's got to be close to seventy," The Faceman said, as he patted his hair for what must have been the twentieth time.

Maxwell looked out the window too, his fingertips tapping nervously on top of the table.
Margaret looked over the top of her cards. "That's a quarter to you Faceman. Let's hurry it up. If it's not seventy degrees yet, it will be soon."

"What about Roosevelt, Margaret! Theodore Roosevelt!"

The viper's eyes looked directly into Maxwell's. "What makes you think I give a shit about Roosevelt! I was just a little girl when he was president."

"But do you remember when he was inaugurated? Do you remember when he was elected for the first time?" Maxwell was starting to get pretty agitated with all the talk about the temperature.

"Shut up Maxwell!" Margaret responded as she threw a quarter into the pot. "I meet your quarter Faceman." She paused for effect. "And I raise you a buck."

"I'm out!" Wally said. He threw his cards on the table.

"Me too," Nick said. He lay his hand down and leaned forward in anticipation of the showdown between The Faceman and Margaret.

The Faceman smiled and patted his hair again.

"How about it Margaret! Do you remember when he was elected?" Maxwell was pleading. He looked frantic, watching the sun on the other side of the window.

"Shut up Maxwell!" The viper was moving in for the kill.

"I'd better go get my beer mug," Big Wally said, "it's got to be close to seventy degrees."

"I'll match the dollar and raise you another," The Faceman said.

"How about when the American Baseball League was formed Margaret! Do you remember that?"

Everybody at the table looked at Maxwell in astonishment, except Margaret who kept her eyes on The Faceman.

"I'll match your dollar and raise you two," she said.

The Faceman stopped patting his hair. He wavered, for the first time, and Margaret noticed. He pushed two dollars into the pot as Booby burst through the door.

"Guess what?"

"The American League! Maxwell shouted. "What about the American Baseball League!"

"Shut up!" The viper said. "All of you guy's shut up!"

Everybody stopped talking. The room fell silent and all eyes moved to Margaret. Maxwell's mouth hung half way open.

"Let's see the cards Faceman," she hissed.
Maxwell slowly leaned forward and thumped his forehead on the top of the table. The Faceman slid his full house toward Margaret and Booby danced restlessly from one foot to the other.

Margaret slapped the flush on top of The Faceman’s hand and Nick rocked his head back and roared. Margaret reached for the money.

"It's seventy degrees!" Booby shouted, unable to contain himself any longer.

Maxwell bumped his head on the table again.

Margaret hacked up a loogie and flipped her ash onto the plastic plate as she swallowed the goober down. "Get the keg tapped," she said to Booby. "I'll go get my beer mug."

*****

The alley behind the house was a dense mass of humanity swarming around a rickety wooden chair near the back door that supported a keg covered with dew and dribbling brown foam from the spigot. Everybody was packed tight around the source of our attention. There was hardly room to turn around next to the keg, but as the distance from the keg increased, the space between the bodies increased too, until the crowd thinned out at well-spaced intervals near the edge of the alley.

The girls squeezed through the crowd wearing halter-tops and shorts, their bodies wrapped in firm skin and goose bumps. The only flaw I could see was the light-colored skin that was the result of a long cold winter. They were working on it though. The temperature was now seventy-five degrees and rising, and every square inch they could get exposed was left open to the sun.

The guys drank cold beer in great big gulps and watched the girls while the cheap-piece-of-shit stereo exploded through one of the basement windows. The vinyl coverings on the sides of the speakers were loosened up with each beat of the bass.

Never met a girl who could make me feel the way that you do
You're all right.
Whenever I'm asked what makes my dreams real
I tell 'em you do
You're outta' sight

Margaret held court in the middle of a crowd near the keg. She held her ancient and well-used beer mug in one hand and a cigarette in the other. She relived with relish the flush that beat the Faceman's full house, while Maxwell sat on the curb at one end of the alley with his head in
his hands. Big Wally told a joke to a group of girls near the back door. His face beamed as he got to the punch line and the girls looked at him in disbelief. He was the only one who laughed but that didn’t stop him from starting another one. The Faceman tried to corner Ashleigh Pierce on the back porch. She dodged him and bounced down the steps to the alley. She looked through the crowd with a purpose, and her eyes stopped when they met mine. Moose spit tobacco juice into the garden bed, and Crasher cornered a good-looking blonde between two parked cars. I was already on my third beer and the music seemed to be getting louder with each passing moment.

I’m bringing you a love that’s true
Get ready, get ready

I’d been talking to Cowgirl. Her face was about six inches from mine. We were in the middle of the crowd between the keg and the back porch. The bodies swarmed around us and jostled us closer and closer together. Every now and then I could feel her lean hard belly push up against mine and the beer would slosh from our mugs and spill onto our shirts, but neither of us cared. In fact, Cowgirl seemed to like it when we touched. She’d push up against me harder than she needed to, and when the movement of the crowd gave us room to separate she chose to stay right where she was, her red hair and green eyes just inches from mine. Her flat belly and hard hipbones would push up tight against me and then she’d laugh and drink a big gulp of beer and the foam would roll out the sides of her mouth. Each time I saw that I felt a warm flush in my crotch.

"Hey Brooks! How about another dollar?"

I turned my head to see Trapper with his monobrow furrowed into a tight knot and his fist full of dollar bills.

"I'll pay!" Cowgirl shouted. She reached into the front pocket of her jeans and her hand lingered there between both of our hips longer than it needed to, and I felt myself start to get a hard-on and my head started to feel light.

"Sure Trapper!" I said. “Just let me see if I can get my wallet."

"I'll get it!" Cowgirl shouted.

And before I knew it she’d handed me her beer mug and completely paralyzed me. I stood motionless with a beer in both hands while Cowgirl groped me. Her right hand reached into my back pocket pulling me closer to her, while her left hand dug deeper into her front pocket just
inches from growing pecker. I felt even more light-headed. I thought I might faint. Cowgirl rocked her head back and howled.

It was then that I looked over Cowgirl’s shoulder and saw her. I hadn’t talked to her in at least a month. She smiled and I smiled back, and then she walked right toward me even as Cowgirl’s hand dug deeper into my pocket. I looked at Cowgirl and then back over her shoulder at Ashleigh Pierce.

“Hi,” she said.

“Ahh … Hi.”

Cowgirl looked over her shoulder at Ashleigh too; who kept her eyes glued on me. I looked back at Cowgirl. I looked for Nick too. Where was he anyway? The piece-of-shit stereo was playing louder than ever.

Well twiddley dee, twiddley dum
Look out baby ’cause here I come.  (5)

*****

She pushed her tongue deeper into my mouth and climbed on top of me and I felt the touch of skin in places I’d never felt it before. The skin of her belly touched the skin of mine. I could feel the touch of her skin on my thighs and my chest and my shoulders too. I’d never realized the touch of skin could feel so delicious. The touch of skin had so intoxicated us that neither one could stop now even if we’d wanted to. Dusk was falling on the alley behind the Sigma Tau house. The crowd had thinned out and the spigot on the keg was dripping its last few drops of flat beer onto the asphalt. Empty paper cups littered the back porch and most of the Sigma Tau’s and Kappa Pi Beta’s and Alpha Pi’s and Sigma Phi’s had moved on. But the piece-of-shit stereo still blared out into the deserted alley.

We were in the tiny room that Nick and I shared on the third floor. The door was locked and we had a sleeping bag spread out over the sandpaper carpet that right now felt like a cloud. It had all happened so fast. I didn’t even know what I was doing for sure, but it felt like the right thing to do.

My fingertips moved into the small depression near the lower part of her back. She pushed her lips hard against mine and I could hear the breath rush out of both of us and mix between our faces. She tilted her head back and for an instant I thought maybe somebody in the hallway might hear us. But the worry passed just as fast as it came, and then there was no stopping it.
My head got light and then she grabbed me tighter and I felt all of her at once. We were as close as two people could ever get. There was warm breath on my left ear and then I lost track of time and place. Nothing mattered anymore and then I was drifting away in the warmth of her. I felt my mind and body separate and then I was floating with her in the room as the music from the alley came up through the window and joined us.

It's real
You know I'm with you all the time
No matter where you are

I felt her skin move with mine each time we took a breath and a tiny puddle of sweat gathered between our navels. Her fingertips touched the back of my neck. She moved her other hand across my chest and the music floated through the window again.

"Sing for me," she said. "I like it when you sing."
I did as she asked.
"It's important to you isn't it?" She said, “... the music I mean."
"Yes."
"I can tell it when you play your piano."
"It's all I think about."
"Why don't you go someplace where you can study it?"
I took a big breath and felt her skin slide across mine on the thin layer of sweat between us.

"I can't," I said.
"Why?"
"There are other things that are more important."
She propped herself up on an elbow.
"I'm glad you're here," she said. “You can do the other things, and still have the music too?"

"Yes, that's right. That's the way it is."
She looked down at me with her hair tumbling over her forehead and her eyes so emerald green and her teeth so perfectly white and straight. She took my breath away.
“Cowgirl," I said. "May I please have another?"
The sound of the piece-of-shit stereo poured out into the empty alley below us.

There's nothin' you can do to make me stop
Lovin' you baby
Booby twisted his mustache on the junior couch between Big Wally and The Faceman.
"Gordon Liddy was sentenced to eighteen months in prison today for refusing to answer jury questions," Walter Cronkite said
The Faceman elbowed Big Wally.
"Move over Wally! You take up too much room!"
Wally surrendered a few inches.
"Eat my shorts!" he responded automatically.
"Gordo's a goner boys!" Moose said. He spit tobacco juice into his Styrofoam cup. His leg dangled over the armrest of one of the senior chairs and his foot rocked gently back and forth over the top of Mitchell's head, which was right beside mine.
"It won't be long now before they all start selling each other out. It'll be just like a house of cards. One guy will knock over the next guy until it goes right to the top."
"In Washington D.C. Martha Mitchell responded to President Nixon's claim that he and John Mitchell didn't meet following the Watergate break in. She called it a "God blessed lie," Cronkite said.
"What did I tell you," Moose said.
"Aren't you the smart one?" Poopsie said, as he sat in the sophomore couch and watched Moose spit. His face grimaced at the site of the thick brown saliva sloshing around in the cup. "That stuff is gonna kill you Moose."
"Meanwhile White House spokesmen have stated that the president will continue what he calls the right policy of bombing Cambodia even though the polls show two of three Americans oppose it," Cronkite said.
Scott Morris sat up in his seat as if struck by lightening.
"Maybe Nixon is just bombing Cambodia so he can distract our attention away from Watergate. Do you think that's what he's doing?"
Nick stopped pulling on my arm. I extended it out in front of me and kept my legs spread wide apart and my head down. I needed a wide base. I needed to watch out for the cross-face too.

"Do you think that's true?" he asked me.

"Sure ... I guess so. It makes sense."

"Do you think the president would do that? Do you think he’d do that just to save his own skin?"

I took advantage of his lapse in concentration. I pushed up to my hands and knees and tried a sit-out. He pulled in on my waist, and I stopped half way through it. I groaned as my breath escaped me.

"Maybe," I gasped. "Maybe the president would do that."

"I don’t like to think about that," he said. "After all, he’s the president. He’s not supposed to do that … being the president and all. Jesus! That just about makes me feel sick."

"Margaret says he’s a crook!" Crasher said. He sat on the sophomore couch with Dudley and Poopsie. "Margaret says he’s been dirty all along and he’s just now getting caught."

"Pablo Picasso was buried today," Cronkite said. "His work stands as a monument to his time. He has been called by many the greatest artist of the twentieth century."

"That’s too bad," Nick said. "That’s too damn bad."

"Shit Strode!" The Faceman said. "What do you care about Picasso?"

"I care … I care about a lot of things."

I was still trying to get up to my hands and knees. I thought if I could catch him distracted by the news, maybe I could improve my situation. Woody entered the room carrying two cans of beer. He sat down next to Moose and popped off the flip-tops.

"How about a beer Moose?" he asked.

"No beers on the first floor," The Faceman said. "It's house rules … you know that."

"Sorry boys, but you'll have to get used to it," Woody said. "It's time for senior rules."

"John Ehrlichman, Bob Haldeman, and John Dean have all resigned over Watergate," Cronkite said.

I ducked just in time and Nick’s cross-face flew over the top of my head.

"What's senior rules?" I asked, but before I got an answer Big Wally interrupted.

"You’re calling senior rules?" he asked.

Woody and Moose both took big gulps of beer and a little bit of froth flowed out of the corner of their mouths and onto their collars.
"You bet!" Moose said. "So get used to it."

Nick hooked his left heel inside my thigh. He scooped my leg out from under me and I fell flat on my face.

"Senior rules are when the seniors have no rules," he said. "They can do anything they want. They decide when it starts in the spring, and it doesn’t end until we throw them out of the sleeping porch."

"What’s the sleeping porch got to do with it?" I asked, as I went back to keeping my base wide and my head down low.

"Secretariat won the Kentucky Derby in record time this year," Cronkite said.

"We’ll be throwing your asses out of the sleeping porch in record time this year too," Booby said.

Moose took another gulp of beer and then put the can down on the armrest of his chair.

"The only way we’re leaving the sleeping porch is if we walk out," he said.

"Bullshit!" Dudley said.

"What did you say Dudley?" The Faceman asked.

I hooked Nick’s right elbow and tried an outside roll but nothing happened. He didn’t even budge.

"They can do anything they want for the rest of the year?" I asked as I felt my right arm getting pulled into an arm-bar.

"Anything until they come up to the sleeping porch and wake us up in the middle of the night," Nick said. "Then it’s our job to throw them out. Once we do that then senior rules are over."

"Dream on," Moose said. "You'll never get us out. You'll never get Pursell out. Have you thought about that?"

"We'll have more guys," Crasher said. "And we've got Nick."

Woody just smiled. "Strode's no match for Pursell," he said. "You pussies will never get Pursell out of the sleeping porch."

"A Souix Indian was critically wounded by FBI agents at Wounded Knee," Cronkite said.

"Let me get this straight," I gasped, as I struggled to keep from being turned over to my back. "The seniors have no rules. They can do anything they want except make noise in the sleeping porch. Once they do that, there's a big fight and when they get thrown out of the sleeping porch then senior rules are over?"

Nick pushed gently on the arm bar and I started to go over.
“That’s right,” he said. “We do it every year. Last year the seniors were so drunk, we had them out in about ten minutes. But they didn’t have anybody like Pursell. He’ll be a problem, no matter how much he’s had to drink.”

“The U.N. today denounced the recent Israeli raids on Lebanon.” Cronkite said.

“Do you think they’ll ever stop fighting?” Nick asked me.

“Who? The seniors and the rest of the house?”

“No. I was talking about the Israeli’s and the Palestinian’s.”

“I don’t know,” I said, from beneath his armpit. “I don’t know why they started in the first place.”

Just then Trapper stuck his head through the doorway. He was wearing his red flannel shirt and he looked pink-faced and breathless.

“The Phantom!” he said. “Second floor new section head! It’s a trophy too!”

Nick let me go and we both stood up. The sophomore and junior couches emptied in an instant. Even Moose and Woody stood up and followed the crowd through the living room door carrying their beer cans. Nick seemed in no hurry to leave, so I stayed with him as the others pushed past us. He gently touched a rug burn on his right elbow.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

He looked at me and said: “Sure.”

“How’s your weight?”

“One ninety seven,” he answered, as he looked back at his elbow.

“You’re still strong, and you’ll be faster at the lighter weight.”

“Yeah … sure.”

I could tell he was smaller. He was starting to look like his old self again. The thickness of his brow had disappeared and his skin had cleared up. But he’d seemed to get quieter as he got smaller. He’d acted almost depressed for the past few weeks.

“What about your economics class?” I persisted. “You haven’t said anything about that in awhile.”

“What about it?”

“Is everything okay?”

“It’s not a problem,” he said.

We waited as the crowd in front of us funneled through the door. We were the last two people in the room. He took a big breath and sighed

“I don’t know what to think,” he said.
I waited.

“Why does everything have to get so complicated?” he continued.

“Like what?”

“Like Watergate for one thing,” he said. “Like thinking about the president hiding things … and I don’t like the war in Vietnam either.’

“Nobody likes it Nick,”

“I’ve been thinking about that draft number I had,” he continued. “I guess I would have gone if they’d had told me too. I mean, I would have just thought that it was the right thing to do. But the draft went away and I didn’t have to worry about it, so I went on thinking that everything would be the way it’s always been.”

I waited while he looked up from his elbow. He seemed to see right through me.

“I guess my world has been pretty small up until now,” he said. “I’m just starting to realize that. I’ve been living in a little world and thinking about a bunch of little stuff that doesn’t really matter that much, and now I’m starting to see things the way they really are and it makes me wish I could go back. It makes me wish I’d never even learned some of this stuff in the first place.”

“You can’t expect to stand still,” I said. “You have to go forward.”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“I guess the world’s not exactly screwed up, it’s just … complicated. But I wish we could go back to the old days … just you and me and the old neighborhood.”

“That would be good,” I said, without much conviction. The old days had been a lot better for him than they had for me. “But there’s no going back,” I concluded.

“I know there isn’t, but I wish we could anyway.”

The crowd in front of the doorway was gone. Everybody was upstairs waiting in line to get a look at The Phantom’s latest specimen. We both felt the emptiness around us and between us.

“And that's the way it is,” Cronkite said. “On Sunday, May sixth, nineteen hundred and seventy three.

36

Spring Luncheon

I was having trouble keeping Cowgirl off my mind. I’d tried to call her on the phone three different times but she wouldn’t talk to me. As the days passed and her reluctance became more
obvious my self-esteem had started to head south after having hit a high the night of the seventy-degree kegger. I wondered if she was just scared about the whole thing like I was, or worse yet if I’d been such a bad lover she didn’t want anything more to do with me.

“Why do you think Cowgirl won’t talk to me?” I asked Nick.

“She’s upset.”

“Why doesn’t she tell me what it is?”

“You’re supposed to know what it is, or else figure it out.”

“But how can I know if she won’t tell me?”

“It’s just the way they operate. They don’t tell you what the problem is. They never do. They just expect you to figure it out and fix it.”

“Is it always like this?”

“Almost always.”

It was another piece of the girls/sex puzzle I didn’t understand. Not only was I having trouble getting Cowgirl to talk to me, Ashleigh Pierce was disappearing from the picture too. She wouldn’t even look at me when I passed her on campus anymore, and after the party she’d started dating the quarterback of the football team. It had only been a couple of weeks and I was right back where I’d started from when I’d arrived for rush. I was wondering if I would ever see either one of them again as we climbed the stairs to Leslie’s house.

Nick and I were both dressed in our best jeans and our best button down shirts with a pair of penny loafers over dark blue dress socks. The clothes seemed to fit him better now than they had just a month ago. He was still lifting weights like crazy, but without the Dianabol his body just kept getting smaller ... shrinking back to his normal size like a sponge does when the water evaporates out of it. He wasn't done shriveling up completely, he was still five pounds over his usual weight, but he would soon be right back to one-ninety, the same weight he had been for the last four years. The lifting alone just wasn't enough.

Spring ball would start in another week and the coaches wouldn’t be able to tell any difference in him. He wouldn’t be any bigger or faster. He would be the same player he’d always been, as good as ever, but he’d have a hard time getting their attention. I couldn’t help but wonder if maybe this year he’d decide that football didn’t matter that much anymore.

He reached out and rang the doorbell and we both looked down at our shoes at the same time. The sun streamed onto the front porch and warmed our backs as we waited. Nick took a deep breath.

“It smells good,” he said.
“Like Spring,” I answered.

“Yeah, it smells like spring for sure.” He took in another big breath and then looked into the garden bed beside the front porch.

“Things change awful fast in the spring don’t they?”

Before I could answer, the door opened and she was standing right in front of us. I forgot all about Cowgirl and Ashleigh Pierce and every other girl I’d ever known in my whole life. My heart stopped for an instant when I looked at her.

“Well, look at you two,” she said. “Please come in gentlemen.”

She was wearing navy blue shorts, the same ones she wore the first time I saw her. In spite of the fact that we hadn’t seen much of the sun for the last few months her legs still looked tanned, so tanned and smooth and perfectly shaped that I had trouble pulling my eyes away from them. She wore a white blouse with the top two buttons undone. A thin gold chain hung around her neck and disappeared beneath her shirt. It had been almost a month since I’d last seen her and I’d nearly forgotten how helpless she made me feel.

I followed Nick into the living room after he’d said hello for both of us. I couldn’t bring myself to even speak. Every time I saw her she seemed even more beautiful than the time before. I couldn’t collect my thoughts fast enough to utter a word. She linked her arms through both of ours and her touch gave me an electric shock.

“My aunts been working on this lunch all day,” she said. “I’m sure you’ll like it. It should be an improvement from your usual fare at The House.”

“The food at The House isn’t so bad,” I blurted out, and immediately felt stupid.

She had a way of making me feel and act almost like a child. She squeezed my arm and smiled at me in a way that I thought was mine alone.

We walked onto a patio in the back yard where there was a small table covered with a blue and white checkered tablecloth. Leslie’s aunt was standing beside the table. Her name was Patricia and she was taller and thinner than Leslie was. She had blond-gray hair and a lighter complexion and her eyes lacked the oriental look of Leslie’s. That part of her must have come from her father.

Nick and I sat down with Leslie in between us and her aunt disappeared into the kitchen. Leslie leaned toward me and put her hand on my thigh and whispered into my ear and I thought my heart would stop.

“She’s been looking forward to having you over,” she said. “She doesn’t get a chance to entertain very often.”
“No problem,” I managed to say. My heart was still palpitating and I felt short of breath. Her hand lingered on my thigh for a few seconds longer than it needed to before she moved it. I tried to figure out how to control my heart rate as Nick and I sat in silence and watched Patricia place the food on the table. Neither of us was used to what we saw.

Most of the time we inhaled our lunch. It was an afterthought that had been assembled by Margaret in just a few minutes and we didn't even bother to take the time to look at it. But this was different. Now, there was a white oval plate on a deep blue place mat with a matching blue napkin cushioning the forks on the left-hand side. In the center of the plate a pasta salad rested on a bed of bright green lettuce. There were chunks of grilled chicken breast on the side and green grapes cut in half surrounding the plate. The green of the grapes looked darker than the lettuce, but lighter than the broccoli that was mixed with the noodles. It looked too beautiful to eat.

"When do you start practice Nick?" Patricia asked as she sat down.

He looked up from his plate as if startled out of a trance. "Spring ball starts next week. It's always the first three weeks in May."

"It must be hard to go to practice and do your schoolwork at the same time."

"It's hard, but it'll work out," Nick said.

He picked up his fork and stabbed one of the noodles in the pasta salad next to the chicken. The noodles were cold and coated with oil and mixed with tomato and red pepper along with the broccoli. He held up the noodle and it dangled from the end of his fork as he inspected it.

"It's a Rotini Noodle," Leslie said.

He ate the noodle and then speared a piece of broccoli and a tomato and ate that too. Then he ate a piece of the chicken and Leslie turned toward me and smiled. My heart rate started to speed up again. Somehow, that smile seemed special … just for me. The way she looked at me and smiled at me, and especially the way she touched me made me feel like she was being more than just friendly. For the first time in a couple of weeks I stopped thinking about Cowgirl. Every time I was around Leslie I stopped thinking about anything else. I couldn't help but think that if maybe Nick wasn't around there might be a chance with her. For the first time I wondered if maybe being with her would be worth giving up everything else. She was magic, at least for me she was. I couldn't help but think that maybe she felt it too.

"It's delicious," Nick said, as he looked at another bite hanging from his fork. "I've never eaten anything so good."

Patricia beamed, and Leslie nudged me with her knee and winked.
"My step mother never cooked anything like this," Nick continued, as he shoveled another forkful of pasta salad into his mouth.

"What happened to your mother?" Patricia asked.

Nick paused briefly with his fork suspended between the plate and his mouth.

"She was killed when I was little," he said. "She was in a car accident and I was so little when it happened that I don't even remember her. My father remarried, but I didn't see him much. He worked at night."

Nick looked at the melon on the salad plate. It sat right next to the chicken pasta. The honeydew and the cantaloupe slices lay fanned out, one on top of another like playing cards. The honeydew was yet another shade of green on the plate, and it contrasted sharply with the orange of the cantaloupe.

"Do you have any brother's or sister's Nick?" Patricia asked.

"Only Brooks," He said as he cut off two pieces of melon with his fork. The words shocked me out of my daydream. I forgot about Leslie for the first time since I'd entered the house and watched Nick examine the green and orange pieces of melon.

"You didn't have brother's or sisters at home with you?" Patricia asked.

He finished the melon and grabbed the large glass of lemonade just above the plate. His fingertips made clear spots on the dew-covered glass. He stopped to answer before he drank.

"My step-mother and I didn't get along too well. My father and she didn't have any children, so it was just the two of us at home. I spent as much time at Brooks' house as I could. When I got up in the morning, I'd go to his place right away. Most day's I'd eat breakfast there. When I got home from school, I'd go there first. I'd only go home when I had to, and I slept at Brooks' place as much as I could."

Nick drank the lemonade and then picked up the French roll from the small plate above the forks and tore it in half.

"Brooks is the only family I've ever had," He said, and I felt myself blush with shame.

Leslie handed him the butter plate. "I'm glad you have each other," she said. "That's the most important thing."

She looked in my direction, but I couldn't meet her eyes. I was afraid to look at her because she caused me too much confusion and too much pain. I had to remember that I loved Nick better. It was best not to think about her too much. She only made me lose track of things. She only reminded me of how she made me feel when she looked at me or touched me or spoke to me the way that she did. She had a way of doing it that no one else did. It was different
than Cowgirl or Ashleigh Pierce or any other girl in the world. I took a bite of pasta salad and wondered if anybody else would come along in my life that made me feel the way she did. It was hard to imagine there was another person in the world like her. Nick deserved her, but it almost seemed cruel that there was only one of her. I ate my pasta salad and grilled chicken and tried not to look at her eyes.

37
Senior Rules

Nick lay in the top bunk near the south wall. His bed was to the west of center-porch. It was a good bunk that had better than average springs. I knew because I slept right below him in the bottom bunk and watched the springs stretch and sag every time he rolled over.

The sleeping porch ran east to west with windows in the north wall. Each window was propped open by a stick to let the air circulate through. The fire code demanded it so the windows of the sleeping porch stayed open all year. In the winter time the porch was so cold we all had to use electric blankets to keep ourselves warm, and the little orange lights on the control boxes dotted the floor beneath the beds on each side of the center aisle. Now, during the warm weather of spring, only a few orange dots could be seen beneath the beds at night.

There was one bed that never had an orange dot beneath it. It was Big Wally’s bed. He slept in a sleeping bag right beneath one of the windows. He slept in the same sleeping bag all year long and that seemed to work just fine for him. He was too lazy to make his bed, and he didn't think a sleeping bag ever needed to be washed. We’d had debates on the topic over many a beer behind closed doors on the second floor, but Big Wally just couldn’t be convinced otherwise. He didn’t care what we thought. He was happy to crawl into that same old dirty sleeping bag every single night.

Nick and I slept in our tennis shoes tonight because there had been rumors that the seniors were coming. That was nothing new. Ever since the start of senior rules there had been a rumor almost every night, but tonight Nick had checked around and he couldn’t find a single senior in the whole house. He knew tonight was the night, so he wore his tennis shoes to bed.

“I stumbled my big toe when the seniors came into the sleeping porch last year,” he’d told me. So I followed his lead and wore mine to bed too.
It was well past midnight and I stared blankly up at the springs of Nick’s bunk. I couldn’t sleep because Big Wally had settled into a steady snoring pattern that consisted of a good minute or two when he seemed to stop breathing completely. Just when he reached the point where I started to wonder if he was dead he would snort two or three times and then take about ten slow breaths with the air rattling in through his throat and then whistling out through his nose. I’d taken some hardware to bed with me just for the occasion, some pencils, a few magazines, and both of my slippers. When I thought I’d go nuts listening to him I’d throw something his way and wake him up just enough to get him to roll over. But the respite only lasted a few minutes. He’d start snorting again in a few minutes and the racket would start all over again. I’d run out of ammunition an hour ago and now there was nothing I could do short of getting out of bed and punching him in the gut, and I just couldn’t bring myself to do it.

There was a sliver of light at the end of the porch and I looked in that direction. It would be unusual for someone to be getting into bed this late at night. The light shone briefly and then the door closed. I sat up in my bed and stayed as quiet as I could. What I saw was the last thing I ever expected.

Cougar was wiggling along the floor like a short fat serpent wearing only his boxer shorts and tennis shoes. He was a senior, of course, and I knew I was witnessing the final act of senior rules, but the site of him and the need to find out just what he was doing down there almost naked on the floor held me speechless in my bunk.

He wiggled along a few feet at a time and then stopped to tug at a long rope that ran beside him from the sliver of light remaining at the doorway. I squinted to get a closer look as he slithered right in front of my bunk. He stopped and set something in the middle of the isle that seemed to be connected to the rope and tinkered with it for a few moments before he rotated on his belly and started back toward the door. Through the dark translucent light of the sleeping porch our eyes met. He froze on the floor hoping that by some miracle I hadn’t seen him, but I gave myself away when I slowly lifted my hand and waved. He brought his index finger to his lips in the universal sign of “be quiet” and I couldn’t help but obey him. Maybe I should have blown the whistle, but for some reason it just didn’t seem like the right thing to do. It was their last night. This was a big deal for Cougar and his pledge class and it seemed like the right thing to do was to let things play out the way that they were supposed to.

I watched him slither back down the hallway and the light from the hallway flooded the sleeping porch for an instant as he slid through. Everything was silent except for Big Wally’s
snoring until I heard a hiss through the rope past the foot of my bed and then the ka-Chink, ka-Chink, ka-Chink of an oscillating sprinkler.

Nick's bed moved suddenly to the sound of the sprinkler and it seemed to take him a moment to realize what it was ... ka-Chink!...ka-Chink!...ka-Chink! We both winced as a spray of water passed over our beds. I pulled the covers back and listened to the shouts that came from the northeast and west entrances.

"Eat my shorts!" they said, and "You'll never get us out!"

I got up and watched the action unfold in the center isle. The porch was really starting to come alive now. The bodies in the bunks were jerking upright as the water from the sprinkler passed over them. Nick was crouched at the end of his bunk patiently watching the dark figures pass through the west entrance. A lean figure passed through the doorway and shouted.

"You'll never get us out you bunch of pussies! You guys couldn't even throw my dick out!"

It was Woody's voice of course. I watched him pass in front of our bunk. Like Cougar he wore only boxer shorts and his tennis shoes. He had a six pack of beer strapped to his waist with a belt through one of the plastic loops. I wondered again why they wore only boxer shorts.

Three more seniors passed in front of us but Nick didn't move. Some of the underclassmen were jumping out of their beds on top of the guys that passed in front of us, I winced again as the water from the sprinkler passed over me once more. Everybody was wide-awake. The sleeping porch had a life of it's own as the bed frames started to shake and half-empty beer cans started rolling down the floor. Seniors were starting to grapple with underclassmen in the aisle, but Nick waited patiently with his eye on the west entrance. He hadn't entered the fray yet.

The light in the doorway disappeared completely for a moment, blotted out by the form passing through it. I saw Nick gather his feet beneath him. He waited until the large figure passed in front of us.

"Come and get me you bunch of pussies!" the gigantic figure shouted.

Nick sprang from the bed at the sound of the voice. He glided through the night air like a panther, and landed on the back of John Pursell. I followed him instinctively and grabbed onto a leg that felt more like a tree trunk.

The vegetable oil surprised both of us. Nick slipped off the big shoulders and had to claw his way back up Pursell's body and hook his right arm around his neck just to hold on. Pursell reared back and roared. He spun to his right, still holding a can of beer in his left hand and kicked his leg. I slid off the end of his foot and crashed into my bunk. Nick hung on for dear life as his
feet flew out from Pursell's body. He kept his arms tethered to the big man’s neck until Pursell reached back with a massive right arm and grabbed Nick around the waist and threw him down the isle like a Frisbee. Nick flew through the air with his arms and legs spread out wide. He landed on his hands and feet in the middle of the isle facing Pursell and sprang forward the instant he hit the ground. He accelerated to full speed with just a few steps and planted his forehead in the middle of Pursell’s chest. The two of them flew backward into a bunk bed and Pursell groaned as they bounced off the beds to the floor.

Nick scrambled on the floor, trying to find something he could hold onto. Pursell laughed as he pulled an oily arm out of Nick’s grasp. He still held the can of beer in his left hand.

“You’ll never get me out,” he shouted. “We broke into the kitchen and covered ourselves with Margaret’s cooking oil. You can’t even grab hold of me.”

There was a creaking sound from the bunk bed on the south wall as it teetered on two legs. Pursell and Nick both looked up at the same time as it slowly leaned toward them and came over the top of its arc and accelerated toward the floor. Nick rolled to his left, pulling Pursell with him as the bunk bed crashed to the floor right beside them. Nobody in the place seemed to even notice as the mattresses and sheets and pillows scattered across the floor.

Woody was one of the first ones to go out. Poopsie and Crasher held him down while Zeke pulled on his leg. He slid across the floor leaving a smear of vegetable oil behind him. They reached the northeast entrance, and the three underclassmen stuffed him through the door like toothpaste through a keyhole. He kicked and screamed and rolled onto the landing, his boxer shorts torn and python hanging out of the fly. He checked to make certain his dick got properly positioned back into his shorts before looking up and flipping Poopsie the bird. Poopsie saluted him back and turned toward the porch. Woody reached for the six-pack still strapped to his waist and pulled another beer from one of the plastic rings and popped the top.

“You’ll never get Pursell out!” he shouted at Poopsie’s back. “My pledge brother John Pursell will come out of there when he’s goddamned good and ready!”

Nick and Pursell got hung up for an instant in one of the sheets. Pursell reached his feet first; still clutching his beer can. He stepped over the mattresses toward the west wall. I had the feeling he’d had enough, but Nick leapt forward and grabbed his right leg. The water from the sprinkler passed over them as Pursell kicked furiously with his leg. Nick held on long enough to reach up and pull Pursell’s boxer shorts down to his ankles. Pursell looked down in surprise. He instinctively reached for his shorts and Nick pushed from behind until Pursell crashed to the floor of the sleeping porch amongst the mattresses and blankets.
Zeke and Trapper were having a tough time with The Faceman. The Face was putting up a damn good fight for a self-absorbed pretty boy from California. He fought like a demon in fact. Zeke tried to hold The Faceman's arms while Trapper pulled on a leg. They nudged him along slowly, sliding across the floor on a thin film of oil. The Faceman reached out to the bed frames whenever he could. Each time he did Zeke had to pry his hands free while Trapper pulled on his legs. Slowly they reached the West entrance and Trapper got one of The Faceman's legs through the door. The Faceman clung to the interior trim on the door. Zeke stopped again to pry his hands free. Trapper got both legs through the door. All they needed to do was get his body through. They each grabbed a leg and pulled and The Faceman went through. He rolled to his side as he came through the door and hacked a hoarse raspy cough. He swallowed the goober he'd coughed up, and looked at Trapper and Zeke.

"Eat my shorts!" He said. He coughed up another loogie as Trapper and Zeke turned back toward the porch. "You'll never get Pursell out," he called after them.

Pursell was still trying to find his boxer shorts. Nick scooped up his arm and pinned it to his body, but the oil and the power of Pursell were too much. The arm came free and Nick ducked as Pursell's elbow flew over the top of his head. Pursell reached again for his boxer shorts and Nick took the opportunity to grab a bed sheet from the floor and throw it over the top of Pursell. He pulled it down and around Pursell's head and shoulders as Pursell kept pulling at his boxer shorts. I could hear the big man pant beneath the sheet. The exertion was getting to him and he seemed pre-occupied with his boxers. He was starting to struggle beneath the sheet and I knew Nick would wear him down. I'd seen it a hundred times.

The seniors were starting to thin out. One by one they were getting dragged to the entrances and stuffed through the doors. Poopsie turned off the sprinkler. I joined Mitchell, Big Wally, and Booby near the west entrance. It took all four of us to get Cougar out. He kicked and fought like a madman. We worked him through the door one piece at a time. First the right leg came through, then the left. His body slid through easily, but he grabbed the doorframe and I had to pry his fingers free one at a time before Mitchell and Big Wally pulled him through. Cougar sat on the floor gasping for air. He looked around himself and counted the bodies. There were only seventeen.

"You'll never get Pursell out!" He shouted to our backs.

I jumped onto the gigantic mound beneath the sheet on the floor. Four others joined us. Nick had him wrapped up. His arms were now pinned to his body inside the sheet with only his ankles sticking out of the bottom. Both feet were hog tied by the boxer shorts that had twisted
around his tennis shoes. We all hung on for dear life as Pursell screamed and struggled. Booby, Mitchell, and Big Wally grabbed onto the sheet and pulled toward the West entrance of the porch. I hung on to Pursell with Nick. We reached the door and all of us pushed at once and stuffed him through the door. He came through an inch at a time, struggling beneath the sheet as his pledge brother's watched in astonishment on the other side of the door. He rolled into the lounge and pulled the sheet off his head and grinned as he looked at his comrades. Woody handed him a beer and Pursell popped the top. He sat on the floor naked except for his tennis shoes and the boxer shorts still twisted around his ankles. He saluted us. We saluted back, and then we all turned away one by one and walked back into the sleeping porch.

"How come they have senior rules anyway?" I asked Nick.

"I don't know," he said. "But it sure is fun."

"Yeah ... It's fun all right," I said, as I walked beside him. I put my arm around his shoulders. He did the same.

"You really handled Pursell tonight," I said.

"Yeah, we took care of the big man all right."

"You're the best," I said, for what must have been the millionth time in my life. "You're the best there ever was. I don't think we'll ever get you out of the sleeping dorm when you're a senior."

"Yes you will," he said. "All of the seniors go through the door when it's their time. I'll be no different than the rest of them."

He climbed up the frame of his bunk bed and pulled his tennis shoes off before crawling between the damp sheets. We both lay on our backs and stared up into the darkness of the sleeping porch and that's when we heard the sound of their voices. The words rumbled up through the stairwell and drifted into the sleeping porch beneath the western door. They sang as they went down the stairs to their clothes on the kitchen floor and a future filled with uncertainty.

I'm always hardy free from care,
My pals are never far.
You'll always find me ready to fight
For dear old Sigma Tau!

Everybody in the sleeping porch was awake just like I was. We were beat up and tired and sweaty and oily, but we weren't in a hurry to go back to sleep. We needed to spend a little
time listening to their voices and thinking about each one of them. There was a lot more to senior rules than just the fun.

38
Spring Scrimmage

The university campus had given way to the sun. It had done so grudgingly in April, but now at the end of May the sun couldn’t be held back anymore and it poured down on all of us through a cloudless sky. It made everything sticky and hot inside the stadium. The aluminum seats almost magnified the sun’s rays and made us feel like franks on a broiler.

The sun brought optimism with it too. This time of year everybody was a winner. This time of year every team had a chance to go all the way, and a bowl game was almost a certainty. Every throw had more velocity than it had last year and every hit seemed a little more vicious. New players had more promise and the old ones looked stronger and faster than the year before.

Coach Fitzpatrick strutted up and down the sideline with his gut sticking out and his cap perched on the back of his head. He twirled his silver whistle around his finger as he walked and his gold tooth shone in the sun. He smiled broadly when a new junior college transfer spun out of the grasp of a linebacker and gained an extra three yards before getting smacked by the safety and dumped on his head at the twenty yard line. Fitzpatrick was counting on the new running back to be able to turn the corner for us, but it looked like he might be able to gain some tough yards inside too.

I was baking on the aluminum griddle with a few thousand other kids trying to pay attention to the scrimmage, but I was doing a lousy job of it. That was because Leslie Cantrell was sitting right beside me and I was having trouble just trying to control my heart rate and keep from fainting.

She was wearing a pair of white shorts and a checkered halter-top that looped around her neck and tied in the back. The cloth cupped her breasts but they really didn’t need to. Each breast looked like it could keep a perfect shape without the help of any support at all. I tried not to stare but they were such a work of art I found it impossible not too. I wished I’d brought my sunglasses so my eyes would be hidden and my attentions a little less obvious. Everywhere I looked her skin tantalized me. I knew that it had to turn lighter under the checkered cloth
somewhere, but I couldn’t see even a hint of change. The golden brown color continued in a seamless pattern everywhere I looked.

“Why isn’t he playing?” she asked me.

I tried to find the breath to speak.

“The coach has to look at everybody during spring scrimmage,” I answered.

Nick was still bouncing around at the end of a big pack of guys near the forty-yard line. He had been warming up for an hour now and still hadn’t gotten in the game.

“But the scrimmage will be over in thirty minutes,” she said. “Shouldn’t he be playing soon?”

Her abdomen was as flat as the aluminum seats we sat on and it disappeared into her shorts without a wrinkle or a fold. Her legs came out the other end of the shorts and the skin there looked as flawless as it did everywhere else. Thin brown sandals cradled her feet. She pulled her hair back and jammed a stick through the piece of leather that held her thick black mane in place. She turned toward me expecting an answer.

“I think he knows what Nick can do,” I said.

The new tight end from California made a catch over the middle and bounced off two defensive backs before the linebacker got over there and smashed into him. The cornerback attacked from the other side and slammed into his hip, but the tight end dragged both of them for another five yards before they all toppled over in a heap. Fitzpatrick beamed when he saw that. The tight end was a red-shirt freshman. He was as tall as Pursell and almost as heavy, but he was faster and had hands as big as fruit baskets. Just then Leslie touched my hand and I felt an electric current run right up the base of my spine.

“It seems that if he were one of the better players he’d be on the field,” she said.

The electric shock was replaced for a moment by a red-hot burning sensation right between my shoulder blades.

“He’s the best,” I said. “The coaches just haven’t figured that out yet.”

She still held my hand. She smiled and I wondered what her eyes looked like behind her sunglasses.

“What’s important seems to change as you get older doesn’t it?” she said. “Nobody will care about the football team ten years from now. There will be other things that are more important than this, don’t you think?” Her hand slid up my arm to my shoulder. She turned toward me and my heart rate increased even more when I looked at the V of her halter-top framing those perfect breasts.
“He has every record,” I stammered. “He was the best there ever was.”
But she moved still closer to me and I could almost smell her breath as it moved past her slightly crooked front tooth.
“Nobody cares about that after awhile,” she said. “There are other things that are more important than a bunch of high school records in a little town far away.”
I was afraid to look into her face. Her lips were just inches away from mine and if I moved at all they might get too close to stop. I looked down instead, and the sight of her thighs made my head swim.
“You’re the kind of guy a girl will look for when she gets older,” Leslie continued. “You have a lot of potential Brooks.”
“I’ll never be half of what he is.”
“Yes you will.”
Nick had given up trying to stay loose. The scrimmage was almost over and he had taken a knee near the edge of the crowd.
“He’s the best there ever was,” I said again. But I didn’t try to move away when her hand lingered around my neck. The electric current was coming back.
“He thinks you’re the best,” she said. “He’s told me so.”
“I’m nothing compared to him,”
“Don’t sell yourself short,” she said.
Fitzpatrick’s whistle blew and the players started to circle around the center of the field. Nick walked to the edge of the crowd. He hadn’t played a down. She kept her arm around my shoulders and sat closer than she needed to. The skin of her hand was wet and tacky where it touched my neck but I didn’t mind and I didn’t want her to move it either. I liked the feel of her even if it was just a few square inches on the back of my neck.
“Nice work!” Fitzpatrick shouted.
The players were jumping up and down uncontrollably now, trying to release the energy that was left over from the scrimmage.
“We have the talent to go all the way,” Fitzpatrick continued, “As long as we have the heart. Do you have heart?”
“Yes!” they screamed in unison. The tempo of their jumping increased. Many of them ran in place like rats on a wheel.
“Are you a team that won’t be denied?” Fitzpatrick shouted.
“Yes!” they shouted back.
They were all winners today. They were undefeated and on their way to a bowl game and a national ranking for sure. Fitzpatrick had them believing it.

“Will I be there for you?”
“Yes!”
“Will you be there for me?”
“Yes!”

Everyone on the team except Nick was jumping around like crazy. They pounded each other on the shoulder pads and crashed their facemasks into each other.

“Can we count on each other?”
“Yes!”

They came together in a tight circle in the middle of the field and the chanting increased and the jumping got faster until Fitzpatrick blew his whistle and everybody sprinted for the showers. I saw Nick walking near the end of the pack with his helmet in his hand. Even as hot as it was, he hadn’t broken a sweat.

“He didn’t play at all,” she said.
“They just don’t know what he can do,” I answered.

“Will you wait for him with me?” she asked. Her hand had moved down from my neck and now it rested on my thigh.

“I can’t,” I said, as I stood up and backed away from her.
“What will I tell him?”
“Tell him I had to go to chemistry lab.”
“You don’t have chemistry lab on Saturdays.”
“Tell him I had to study,” I said, as I continued to back up. The more I looked at her the more I moved past excitement toward panic.

“What’s the matter?”
“Nothing.”
“Don’t be scared.”

I tripped on one of the bleacher seats and gouged my calf into a sharp corner of aluminum. I swore as I grabbed the shredded skin, and she looked at me like I was nuts. I turned and walked away without looking back. My head told me to keep walking but my heart screamed at me to turn back. No matter how hard I tried to deny it I had to admit I was in love with my best friend’s girlfriend, and the worst part was that she might be loving me back.
The Big Dodge rolled toward Stateline on a smooth straight section of two-lane blacktop. Nick was driving with Crasher riding shotgun, and Mitchell and I rode in the back. The needle on the speedometer of the big silver sedan quivered just past sixty-five.

We all watched the country move past the window. The land was flat except for the mountain range that rose above the prairie to the east. Small farms dotted the landscape on each side of us. Most of the barns had been abandoned years ago, and they looked like wooden skeletons in the early evening light. Some of the roofs of the old buildings sagged like the spine of an ancient horse. They held nothing within them. The farm machinery was stored now in modern aluminum-roofed storage huts, and the metal looked cold and dead compared to the wood.

The warm breeze of early June brought two things to the university, good weather and finals. Sunshine and exams were a strange combination, but it had always been that way around here.

“How was your zoology test?” Crasher asked me.
I fended off a punch from Mitchell. “It was okay,” I said, as I punched Mitchell back.
“Of course it was okay,” Nick said. “It’s always okay for you. This set of finals will be no different than the others.” Nick sighed and looked out the window again. “If you weren’t my best friend I’d hate your guts. You make it all seem so easy.”

“Look who’s talking,” I said.
“Yeah sure,” he said, without much conviction.

Spring ball was history and neither one of us wanted to talk about it. He’d been honest on his pledge to stay off the steroids, and he was right back down to one-ninety.

“Where are we going anyway?” I asked.
“The Roadhouse,” Crasher said. “Everybody goes to The Roadhouse after finals.”
The Big Dodge hit a bump and the radio turned off. Crasher looked at Nick in bewilderment.

“It does that sometimes,” Nick said. “Just wait a little while and it’ll turn back on by itself.”
“There’s girls at the Roadhouse aren’t there?” Mitchell said.
“That’s right,” Crasher answered.
“There’s lots of ‘em.” Mitchell said, as he grinned and then punched me again. “There’s lots of music and lots of girls. That means lots of possibilities.” Mitchell’s voice trailed off as he looked out the window.

Nick slowed The Big Dodge down as we entered the little border town of Stateline. He idled down the main street for three blocks and then took a right into the parking lot at The Roadhouse Tavern. The Big Dodge heaved as it bounced over the speed bump and the radio turned itself back on.

We all looked for an empty spot in a parking lot that was as big as a football field and jammed nearly full with all kinds of college jalopies. Cars packed full of kids competed for a rapidly diminishing number of parking spaces. Nick swept The Big Dodge wide around the outside of the lot and drove past the front entrance. He slowed down and looked to his left while Mitchell and I ogled the girls who were standing in line to our right. Nick spotted two people getting into a car three rows from the front door. He gunned The Big Dodge forward and turned the corner quickly. Mitchell slid across the vinyl seat cover and squished me against the door panel, and then Nick aimed us toward the open spot. A yellow Chevy Nova was slowly pulling out just as a blue Ford Mustang approached from the other direction. The driver tried to slip the Mustang in front of the Nova but Nick stuffed the nose of The Big Dodge into the empty spot just in time. The driver of the Mustang flipped us the bird and Crasher yelled, “eat me!” Then the Mustang burned rubber behind us. Nick backed up and centered The Big Dodge before pulling it in slowly. There was barely enough room to get the doors open.

The parking lot had a life of it's own. Kids milled around the cars and waited in line to pay their cover charge. They were done with finals but not ready to go home. A sense of relief percolated through the air in front of The Roadhouse. Anxiety passed out of us like steam through a pressure cooker. Nick pulled the keys out of the ignition and put them into his pocket.

"I'll drive tonight,” he said. “Party all you want."

We stepped out of the car and walked to the line in front of The Roadhouse. Mitchell walked up to the first girl he saw and said: "My name's Mitchell." He had his hands stuffed into his pockets and he grinned at the girls as if it were a pleasure for them to meet him. There was an awkward silence as the blonde closest to us stared at him in disbelief.

“So how do you like me so far?” he asked her.

She shook her head and turned away.

Crasher punched Mitchell in the shoulder.
“This is going be a long night,” Nick sighed. “I've got to put up with Mitchell all night without drinking.” I just shrugged my shoulders.

We paid our cover charge and walked into the building. I followed Crasher through the smoky air and dim lights to a table at the edge of the dance floor. The music was so loud it made small little ripples in the glasses of beer on the tables. We ordered three pitchers and Nick got a bottle of Coke. I took a look around. It was my first time in The Roadhouse.

The east wall was about one hundred feet long and the stage backed up against it. The dance floor was in front of the stage and electrical extension cords that were held down with duct tape ran along the sides of the well-worn surface. A thin carpet surrounded the dance floor. It was the cheap kind of carpet that soaked up beer without getting stained. It was the kind of carpet that gave you a rug-burn just from looking at it. Tables and chairs rested on the carpet and almost all of the chairs were filled with thirsty kids who kept their tables covered with half empty glasses of beer. The glasses were steadily refilled from the pitchers, and the pitchers were hauled back to the bar by barmmaids who had them refilled as fast as they could. At the southern end of the building there was a fire escape in the center of the wall with an alarm above it that said, "For Emergency Use Only."

There were people milling around everywhere, but even in the middle of all the confusion the bouncer was easy to spot. He stood with his back against the end of the bar and his arms folded across his chest. He looked about six-one. He was heavy for his height. His legs and butt were thick with muscle. His body was round and solid too, and his arms bulged out from beneath the sleeves of a tee shirt that was just a little bit too small. He was older than the rest of us, maybe thirty, and his face showed it. His hairline was receding, and the dark straight hair thinned out on the sides and in the front. There was a bald spot in the back of his head too, that I could see when he turned around. He had a square chin that was covered with dark black beard stubble. He had small black pig-eyes, and his mouth was fixed in a permanent scowl. He nodded suddenly, almost in deference, and then stepped out of the way to let another man pass. He seemed almost anxious to get out of the guy’s way.

The other guy moved past him with an unusual gait that was smooth and loose and rhythmic. He was a little taller than the bouncer, maybe six foot two or three and he weighed about two-ten or two-fifteen. He moved like a much lighter man. He moved like a great big predatory animal. He walked through the crowd of students and past the gaze of the other man without a hint of anything but confidence. He had short dark hair and brown chiseled features. His eyes were dark and intense and one of his eyelids drooped down a little bit as if partially
paralyzed. His shoulders were extraordinarily broad, and his waist and hips were narrow. He was handsome I guess, in a different sort of way. He must have been handsome because every girl he walked by took another look.

“Who’s that?” I asked Crasher.
He turned around in his chair and followed my gaze.
“That’s the bouncer,” he said.
“No,” I said. “Who’s the other guy … the tall dark guy with short black hair whose walking past the bar.”

Crasher looked again and arched his eyebrows.
“Stay away from that guy Brooks. Don’t even get close to that guy.”
“Okay, but who is he?”

Crasher took a long drink of beer and then filled both of our glasses.
“His name is Ruas … Michael I think. He hangs around here a lot and he’s bad news.”
I waited for Crasher to continue but he didn’t seem to want to. He just looked down into his glass while Ruas stopped at the bar and bought a schooner of beer. He walked into the crowd and sat at a small table away from the dance floor. He seemed almost bored as he watched the crowd.

“The rumor is he’s from Brazil,” Crasher continued finally, as Ruas sipped his beer.
“They say that’s where he learned it … in Brazil.”
“What are you talking about?” I asked.
“They say that when he was a little kid he learned to fight because he had to, you know, to stay alive and all that, at least that’s what they say. But when he got older he kept doing it because he was good at it … and because he liked it. That’s what they say anyway. There are so many rumors about that guy it’s hard to know what to believe.”

“He’s a boxer then?” I asked, taking another drink from my beer.
“Well … sort of I guess. They say he’s done some boxing and some martial arts too, but what he’s good at is the kind of fighting that doesn’t have any rules. He likes to fight in the street. Some people say he’s even fought for money in the streets.”

Suddenly I got the picture. “Is that why he’s here?” I asked in astonishment as I realized he was looking right at me. I’d been staring at him the whole time Crasher had been talking. Now he was staring right back at me and he didn’t look too pleased. I turned my eyes away. The last thing I needed was to be giving a street fighter an excuse to knock my block off.

Crasher continued as if he hadn’t even heard me.
“I’ve heard people say that he’s even been hired to beat people up, at least that’s what they say. I wouldn’t doubt it though. I wouldn’t doubt it a bit.”

“Why?”

“Because I saw him once in the parking lot out front. It was last spring and he picked a fight with a guy who didn’t know any better and he beat him up pretty bad. He beat the guy until he couldn’t even stand up and then he stomped his head right into the parking lot. It almost made me want to throw up.”

The way he said it almost made me want to throw up too. The atmosphere inside The Roadhouse didn’t help either. It smelled thick with sweat and stale beer.

“And you know what else?” Crasher said finally.

I waited.

“The worst thing about it was that he liked it. I really think Ruas likes doing that kind of stuff.”

“What about his eyelid?” I asked. “Why does his eyelid hang down like that?”

Crasher put down his glass. “Jesus!” he said. “Don’t even mention that in here. He’s real sensitive about that. He just goes ape-shit when anybody mentions his eyelid.”

I’d heard all I wanted to hear about Michael Ruas. I also wanted to avoid any more eye contact with him so I watched the barmaid instead. She was carrying a platter and placing the empty pitchers on top of it. Every time she bent over her short denim skirt lifted up in the back and I could see the firm skin on the back of her thighs. She noticed me watching her and smiled with big white teeth and I forgot about Michael Ruas. I also felt that old familiar ache that always seemed to show up whenever there were girls like the barmaid around.

She took her tray of empty pitchers back to a big bar with a large mirror behind it and shelves filled with hard liquor. Three bartenders scurried back and forth trying to keep up with the demands of the crowd but none of them bothered much with the hard booze. They made their money selling beer. There were twelve taps sticking up from behind the bar and they used all of them at once as they filled the pitchers and collected the money. Pitchers and glasses slid on top of the smooth surface of the bar to the sound of the cash registers ringing up another sale.

By the time the barmaid had gotten back to the table right in front of us I’d drained the last drops of my second beer. I liked the light feeling in my head as I watched her work. She was closer to us now and her hair was slowly coming unraveled. Wisps of it hung down in front of her face, and she constantly swiped at them with her free hand. She stepped closer and my heart
rate picked up. She leaned over the table in front of us, and I could see little droplets of sweat on her forehead.

"Brooks!"
I turned to find Crasher staring at me in mock disgust.
"What are you looking at?" he asked.
"Nothing!"
"Then what are you thinking about?"
"Nothing!"
"This boy needs a hard drink," Crasher said to Nick.
"Or else a cold shower," Mitchell added.
"Crasher will buy!" Nick said.
"I never said I'd buy!"
I stood up from my chair and pulled Crasher from his. "Count me in," I said. "What kind of drink should I get?"
"Don't worry! I'll get you what you need."
We all moved toward the bar but Nick stepped away from us and walked toward the head.
"I'll meet you at the bar," he said.
He still carried his coke in his right hand. His shirt fit better now that the steroids were gone. He looked just like he had last summer, and the summer before that. He was down to his normal weight, and I couldn’t help but think he looked better than before. The Dianabol had made him look almost too big.

"Here! Have a shot of this!" Crasher said, and he handed me a tall glass of clear liquid and ice. There were a few bubbles working their way to the top where they burst on the surface. I took a drink and it made me breath fire.

"It'll put hair on your chest," Crasher said and he slapped me on the back. "How about a game of pool?"
I looked into the top of my drink, wondering what could make it taste like that. "A game of pool sounds good," I said, as I waited for the sensation to come back into my throat.
Mitchell and I followed Crasher to the pool tables in the corner by the front door. Each table was beneath a dark green lamp that hung suspended from a cheap gold chain. The smoke that was part of the air in The Roadhouse swirled beneath the lights and the moisture from all of the bodies condensed on the inside of the nearby windows. They were the only windows in the
whole place. The action was light tonight so we got a table right away. Mitchell and I watched Crasher place a quarter in the slot and press the lever. There was a loud clunk as the balls fell out of the rack inside and rolled to the end of the table. Mitchell placed them on the table as I took another drink and then walked toward the pool cues on the wall. I didn't see him. It seemed like he came out of nowhere and somehow I ran right into him. He stopped me in my tracks. I looked up into a dark face that sneered down at me with eyes that looked almost black, one of them partially hidden behind an eyelid that drooped down.

"What are you looking at!" he said.
I'd lost track of him since getting distracted by the barmaid.
"I didn't see ..."
Before I could finish the sentence his hand came out and I felt the tips of his fingers in the center of my chest. I could feel the strength of him pass through the center of me as he pushed. I backpedaled and felt my lower spine slam hard against the corner of the pool table. The glass of booze tumbled to the floor.
"I didn't mean ...."
I didn't feel anything at first. There was a jolt like an electric shock that made my whole body shudder, and then I started falling. I saw stars and hit the floor, and then there was a thud as the back of my head crashed into the beer-stained linoleum. I looked up at the lights over the pool tables and felt warm blood in my mouth. There was something rattling around in the back of my throat too. I sat up and spit my left front tooth into the palm of my hand. There was a stream of blood running from my mouth to the floor. I hadn't even had time to feel any pain. Crasher's voice sounded far away and then Mitchell's face was right in front of mine and then there was the sound of a fist on skin and Crasher tumbled to the floor right next to me.

"Out! All of you! Get out!"
I tried to focus on the voice as Mitchell helped me up. I stood in a fog and looked at the huge thick frame of the bouncer, his small black pig-eyes and dark beard stubble right in front of my face. He grabbed my arm with one of his big meaty hands and dragged me toward the front door and shoved me through. All three of us stumbled into the evening air, and it felt suddenly cool and dry compared to the warmth and moisture inside. I struggled to regain my senses. I stumbled with Mitchell and Crasher toward The Big Dodge and spit blood on the ground.

I wondered where he was as I gained some orientation and felt my panic returning. I saw the bouncer turn around and go inside, and then out of nowhere Ruas was in front of me, his left eyelid quivering at half-mast. He grabbed me by the front of my shirt and his knee came up and I
felt the air go out of my lungs. The asphalt came up into my forehead and I saw stars again. I rolled over. Somewhere far away I heard the voices of Crasher and Mitchell. I sat up slowly and that was when I saw him. He walked from the darkness into the light of the street lamp by The Big Dodge. He walked deliberately, the empty bottle of Coke still dangling from his fingertips. He stepped into the light, and I felt relief when I saw him. He had a look of anticipation on his face and he was locked into the place he liked to be. I was still watching Nick when Ruas stepped forward and kicked me in the thigh. I felt the pain shoot all the way down to my toes.

Nick sprang forward as the boot met my flesh, but I shouted his name and he stopped as suddenly as he started. Ruas stopped too, and for a moment they sized each other up. I pushed myself back between the cars and stood up near Crasher and Mitchell. Nick stepped in front of Ruas and the light from the street lamp illuminated both of them. The bottle slipped from Nick’s fingers. It made a hollow sound as it bounced twice on the asphalt and then rolled beneath The Big Dodge.

40
Warrior/God

Ruas was two or three inches taller than Nick. He stood in a boxer’s stance and looked down at Nick who squatted the way all wrestlers do. He paused as if to study the college-kid for an instant and then started bouncing up and down on his toes. It was easy to see that the anticipation excited him. Crasher was right. Ruas did this because he liked it. He circled a quarter turn to his left and then kicked out with his right foot and followed that with a right hand aimed at Nick’s temple.

The boot made solid contact on the mid-portion of Nick’s thigh just before the fist landed on his eyebrow. The skin split beneath the knuckle and Nick shuffled backward. The punch had been fast, almost too fast to see, and before Nick even knew what had hit him Ruas was back in his original position bouncing up and down on his toes again. Ruas watched with satisfaction as a trickle of blood ran down Nick’s cheek and into the corner of his mouth. Nick spit it out and smiled back at Ruas.

"Your quick," he said.

Ruas tried to hide his surprise. Most guys would have been terrified. Most guys would have been in a panic and doing something stupid right now.

"Too quick for you," Ruas responded.
“You’d better be quick,” Nick said, as he raised his hands up again and moved to his right. He was smiling at Ruas again … almost taunting him. "Because you punch like a girl," he said.

Ruas flushed bright red and his half-mast eyelid quivered and he kicked out again with his right foot but Nick raised his left leg and the boot landed softly on the back of his thigh. Ruas kicked again and again, but each time he did Nick countered by raising his leg and absorbing the impact on the back of his thigh. Ruas shot another right hand, but Nick moved his head to the right and the blow grazed off his left shoulder.

For an instant Ruas looked frustrated. He planted his right foot on the asphalt and aimed the toe of his left boot toward Nick’s balls. His foot came up, but it never met the target because Nick blocked the kick with his knee and closed the distance between them in an instant. Ruas felt the shorter man’s body up next to his and he automatically protected his groin with his thigh. He raised his right arm to strike down with his elbow but before he could drop the hammer a thumb came up under his armpit and he shouted out in pain. He tried to spin away but got stopped short when a knee came up and slammed into his right thigh. Nick grabbed Ruas by the shirt and bull-rushed him back into the pointed fender of The Big Dodge. It jammed into Ruas’s spine and almost paralyzed him with pain. He was learning that the night wouldn’t be so easy. Everything Nick touched made him hurt. He hadn’t picked a fight with a regular college kid. This was a one-hundred-ninety-pound bolt of lightening.

The two of them rolled along the side of the car as we scattered out of the way and they struggled to maintain their balance. Ruas slipped a thumb under Nick’s chin and searched for the base of his neck. He pushed frantically with his thumb trying to choke, but Nick’s neck was too thick and too strong. He brought his knee up into Nick’s inner thigh and I heard a groan. There was separation and Ruas pushed frantically away. He scraped the inner part of Nick’s shin with the heel of his boot and stamped down hard on Nick’s tennis shoe. They spun around until they cleared the back end of the car and stumbled back into the open area beneath the light.

Nick was in front of Ruas instantly, crouched down with his hands up in his wrestler’s stance. The blood had dried in front of his left ear. Ruas moved away as he rubbed his right thigh. He looked at Nick with respect now, but not fear. He circled to his left again. He was learning that Nick liked the action just as much as he did, but I knew there was a difference. It wasn’t so much the violence that Nick liked as it was the competition. He’d missed that more than anything else the past couple of years. The competition was what he was made for.
Ruas moved carefully around the perimeter of the lighted area. A small crowd was gathering around the back of The Big Dodge forming a ring beneath the streetlight. Ruas kicked and again the blow landed softly on the back of Nick's thigh. He punched quickly following each kick, striking over and over with both hands and the blows skimmed around Nick's head. Some of them landed on his shoulders and neck. A few of them landed solidly on the top of his head and one opened up a small cut on his chin. Nick lunged at the punches as they came toward him, grabbing for an arm or a hand, but Ruas was too quick. He moved side to side and back and forth, avoiding the shorter man. He was gaining some confidence as he peppered Nick from the outside. It was clear he'd decided to fight from a distance. He didn't want to close with Nick again, and who could blame him? The progress was slow, but he was doing some damage now, and if Nick were going to have a chance he would have to get in close. Ruas was very good.

"What's the matter with your eye?" Nick asked suddenly.

The question seemed so unusual considering the circumstances that it almost made me forget the queasy-sick feeling I had in my stomach. I was still holding one of my front teeth in my left hand and my gut still ached from Ruas's knee, but I was ready to jump in if I had to. I doubted that I'd be much help because I felt like I might throw up at any minute. The question from Nick made me wonder if he was still thinking straight. Then I saw Ruas start twitching as soon as he heard the words.

"What?"

"Your eye. Why does it look like that?" Nick asked.

The drooping eyelid was quivering uncontrollably now.

"What are you talking about asshole?"

"You should wear a patch so people don't have to look at it," Nick said.

Ruas was starting to shake uncontrollably. He shouted, "Fuck you!" and rushed forward kicking wildly with his right foot and swinging with both fists, but none of the blows landed because Nick moved forward at the same time and closed the distance between them in a heartbeat. Before Ruas knew it, Nick had both of his feet in the air and then he was on the asphalt ... the last place anybody wanted to be with Nick Strode.

Ruas needed to keep Nick close to neutralize him, so he reached around Nick's neck with his arms and tried to lock his legs around Nick's waist, but he couldn't do it because a knee came up hard into his groin. Ruas groaned and his back arched in pain and then Nick's head slipped away from him. An elbow crashed into Ruas's jaw and his head snapped back into the pavement, making the same sound a cantaloupe does when it falls on the floor. Nearly
unconscious now, Ruas clumsily tried to grab Nick again and pull him close to stop the pain but he couldn’t do it. An unstoppable force was now dictating the action.

Nick rolled him over and smashed his face into the asphalt. The power and speed with which he worked on the ground was astonishing. He pulled both arms back in one sweeping motion and then wrist-locked the right elbow to full extension. As soon as Ruas felt the joint lock his head came up off the asphalt. There was blood dripping from the end of his nose and his eyes were filled with terror. Nick smashed the heel of his hand into the back of the elbow and it snapped loud enough for everybody in the parking lot to hear it. Ruas screamed as the joint shattered. Another forearm came down on the back of his head, and his forehead smashed back into the asphalt. The skin split open and blood poured out onto the parking lot, mixing with the dirt and the motor oil.

Rulas’s world had turned black and painful and he had nowhere to run or hide. He raised his head again in a panic. He tried to scream again, but Nick’s forearm slipped under his chin and he stopped making any sound at all when Nick’s arm pulled back against his throat. I jumped on top of Nick and tried to pry him off but I was too late. I heard the larynx fracture and the airway close off. Now Ruas couldn’t see and he couldn’t speak and he couldn’t breath. His broken arm was dangling useless at his side.

Nick clung to his back like a giant crab with his feet hooked inside the thighs and his arms wrapped around the neck. Crasher and Mitchell joined me and we pulled frantically at Nick’s arms, pleading with him to let Ruas go but he couldn’t hear us. He was hovering right above Ruas’s right ear. He was speaking to him even as Ruas strangled on his own spit.

"I'll find you," he was saying. "I'll track you down if you ever hurt him again."

Ruras struggled for breath. His chest heaved but nothing passed through his fractured larynx. He squirmed beneath the Warrior/God; frantic in his own suffocation until the panic seemed to go away and his head slowly slipped forward beneath the hot breath of Nick. His arms and legs twitched a few times and then his consciousness turned as black as the asphalt of the parking lot. He didn’t move anymore after that.

41
Northbound

“Turn around Brooks."
The Big Dodge was headed north on highway 7 toward Canada. Crasher and Mitchell were in the back seat. They sat closer together than they needed to and both of them looked white as paste. Neither one said a word.

Nick was in the passenger’s seat. The blood had dried in a crusty dribble on the side of his temple, and his Levi’s were torn over the right kneecap. The skin beneath the denim was scraped raw and a fragile fresh scab clung to the flesh, but he looked like he could care less. He looked straight ahead out the windshield.

"You need to turn around," he said again.

I had both hands on the steering wheel. I’d stuffed the tail of my shirt into my mouth and I used my tongue to push a wad of cloth up into the space that used to be occupied by my front tooth. I had The Big Dodge floored and the V-8 roared beneath the wide flat hood. The speedometer was inching its way past ninety.

"We'll go north," I said. "We'll go all the way to Canada."

He just shook his head. "What will we do when we get there? None of this will go away. You need to turn around."

"We can hide. We can lay low and hide. It wasn't your fault."

"If it wasn't my fault then we shouldn't be running."

"It wasn't your fault," I said again. "That son-of-a-bitch deserved it."

Crasher put his arm around Mitchell who looked like he might throw up.

"You need to turn around and go back," Nick said again.

"But they'll put you in jail."

"They'll find us anyway. It doesn't matter if we go to Canada. They'll find all of us and then you'll be in trouble too."

"I don't care if I get into trouble."

"I do."

He reached over and turned the engine off and pulled the keys out of the ignition and The Big Dodge died. I wrestled with the steering wheel as the power steering went out and the car felt like it weighed ten tons. I struggled until he reached over and grabbed the wheel too and we rolled to a stop at the side of the road.

"We have to go back," he said.

"Give me the keys!"

I reached for the keys, but he wouldn't allow it. He pushed me away with his left hand.
"It'll be alright," he said. "If I go to jail it won't be for very long. It was an accident. It'll all work itself out and everything will be fine." He put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Trust me, it'll be okay."

He put the keys back in the ignition and The Big Dodge returned to life with a twist of his wrist. We sat for a moment looking out the front window as The Big Dodge idled at nine hundred RPM. Neither one of us seemed to be in too big of a hurry now that the decision had been made.

"There's no moon tonight," he said finally.
I wiped my face with the back of my hand. I appreciated his attempt at distraction.
"That's why the stars look so bright," I answered back.
He pointed straight ahead. "Is that the North Star?" He asked.
"That's the Big Dipper," I said. "You follow the two stars on the end of the bucket to find the North Star. It's over to the right."

"That's right," he said. "You've told me that before."
"You were never very good at astronomy."
"Where's Orion? I always liked Orion."
"It's behind us. Orion's in the southern skies."
"That's right. You've told me that before too, but I always forget." He took a big breath.
"I flunked my economics course," he said.
I didn't answer. I just looked out the window and waited.
"I couldn't pass the tests," he said. "Sometimes I get frozen up and I can't think. I studied hard. I did the work, but I just couldn't pass the tests."
"Can you take it again next year?" I asked.
"They won't let me take it again, but it doesn't really matter anyway."
"Why not?"
"Because I lost my football scholarship too. I won't be coming back to the university next year."

The hole where my tooth had been was starting to bleed again, but I didn't care. I swallowed the blood that had pooled in the back of my throat.
"When did you hear about your scholarship?"
"Fitzpatrick told me yesterday. He said they didn't have a place for me next year. He said I'm not big enough for the line, and I'm not fast enough for the backfield. He says I'm caught in between. I don't know what I'm gonna tell my dad."
I couldn’t speak so I kept my eyes on the Big Dipper and stuffed the tail of my shirt back into my mouth.

"Nick"

It was Mitchell. He was looking out the front window too. It was the first time he’d spoken since we’d left the Roadhouse. He still looked pale. His eyes were vacant, and Crasher’s arm was still around his shoulders.

"What Mitchell?"

"I saw the whole thing. He was good, but not as good as you. You’re the best I’ve ever seen. You’re the best there ever was."

"There was nothing good about it," Nick said. "But maybe tomorrow I can start over."
He turned the radio on but nothing happened. The light came on and a hum came out of the speaker, but there was no music.

"I'd be jealous of you," he said to me. "If I didn't love you so much."
I waited because I couldn’t speak.

"If I could be anybody in the world," he continued. "I'd be you."
Now it was almost impossible to keep myself composed. I pulled the shirt out of the corner of my mouth and used it to wipe my nose.

"You have more potential than anybody I know," he continued. "You see things that no one else can see. Sometimes I wish I could be you for just a day so I could see what the world looks like through your eyes."

We stared out the window in silence, both of watching the Big Dipper.

"It's too bad we can't switch," I said finally. "Because I've spent my whole life wishing I were you." I wiped my nose again with my shirt.

The Big Dodge rocked back and forth in an uneasy rhythm as we sat on the side of the road and looked out through the windshield at the night. Somewhere in the middle of that darkness The Big River was working it's way west. It didn't care about growing up, or friends, or college, or changes. It just kept doing the same thing it always had, and I couldn't help but wish that life could be so constant.
I sat in one of the senior chairs. The sun was setting over my shoulder and the light streamed through the window and warmed my shoulders as I watched the news and picked at a loose thread on the armrest.

"In an interview today, John Ehrlichman accused John Mitchell of selecting the Watergate Hotel for wire tapping," Walter Cronkite said. "And in a separate interview, John Dean linked President Nixon, Bob Haldeman, and John Ehrlichman to the cover up."

"Those guys in the White House are finished," I said to himself. "Everything just caught up with them and they couldn't stop it. It's just like Moose said it would be."

"President Nixon admitted a White House role in the cover up but denies any direct knowledge," Cronkite said. "The president also vetoed a senate ban on bombing Cambodia today, maintaining that the bombing represents the right policy at the right time for Southeast Asia."

To my surprise I heard the back door open and I waited for a face to appear from around the corner, but nobody showed up. I waited and watched longer than I needed to before deciding that I must have been mistaken. There was no one in The House but me.

"Skylab astronauts splashed down today after successfully repairing solar panels on the Skylab Space Station," Cronkite said.

I leaned my head back in Moose’s chair. It was no wonder he always grabbed it before anybody else could get to it. It was real comfortable. I thought again about how he would be gone next year along with all the rest of the seniors and I felt a hollow spot in the middle of my stomach. Next year the sophomore couch would be mine. I’d own a spot on it every night for the news, just like Moose had owned the chair I was in now.

"Jeb Magruder linked John Dean and John Mitchell to the Watergate break in and also accused Bob Haldeman of coordinating the cover up. John Dean meanwhile took the Fifth Amendment at the Watergate hearings."

I was getting hungry and there was no food to be found anywhere. Margaret had left town three days ago and I’d had to forage for myself. The House felt like a ghost town now. It looked old, and tired, and worn out. It almost gave me the creeps.

I thought about walking down to the grocery store and buying something to eat, but it sounded like too much work. Tomorrow I’d ride home in The Big Dodge and find plenty to eat and maybe see Nick too. I didn’t know what was going to happen to him, but it didn’t sound like they were going to put him in jail. Michael Ruas had a record it turned out, and besides, the whole thing had just been a big accident.
I wondered if there was something to eat upstairs. Some of the guys had kept small refrigerators in their rooms during the school year, and maybe there was one somewhere up there with some food in it.

"Secretariat returned home today," Cronkite said. "The Triple Crown winner can now look forward to a comfortable retirement after completing one of the most remarkable careers in horse racing history."

I wondered if I could work out a retirement just like Secretariat's. I'd take a different mare every night for as long as I could keep up the pace. I thought again about how Cowgirl had felt that afternoon … the touch of her skin how she'd taken my breath away. She was probably back in Montana now. For an instant, I thought about going back to see her. But I had a job in the harvest back home, and I'd have to hang around for Nick's hearing. There was no way I could go to Montana, not this summer anyway. Besides, I couldn't tell if she wanted to see me again or not. I'd called her a couple more times and gotten to speak with her once, but she hadn't sounded all that interested, and then there was Leslie. I'd been seeing a lot more of her recently and every time I got close to her I got even more confused and any thought of Cowgirl just disappeared. I stood up from my chair and walked across the room toward the television.

"And that's the way it is on Friday, June 22nd, nineteen seventy thr..........."

I pushed the button and silenced Walter Cronkite for the last time before walking toward the old section stairs. I stopped as I passed by the empty living room and realized I had three more years in The House and then I'd be gone just like Moose. That's a long time ... three years. It's almost an eternity when you're only nineteen.

I walked up the stairs to the second floor and turned left past the wake-up board on the wall. A few leftover tags dangled from the brass hooks on the lacquered wood. I was headed for Poopsie's room. He'd had a refrigerator when I'd roomed with him last winter; maybe he'd forgotten to take it home with him and left some food in it. I rounded the corner of the second floor by the head and that's when I saw him.

He was wandering down the hallway in no particular hurry. He'd stop every now and then and look into one of the rooms and sometimes he'd just stand in the hall and look at nothing at all. I watched him for a few minutes just stare into Poopsies room. I thought he'd be long gone by now, headed south to the California sunshine in that tricked out Camaro if his.

"Hey Faceman."

He turned around with a surprised look on his face. I could almost see him blush when he saw me.
“Hi Brooks.”
“What are you doing?”
“Oh not much, just wandering around. Just ... kind of ... taking a last look around you know?”

I walked down the hall and stood next to him. I took a look into the room as well.
“Damn!” I said.
“What’s the matter?”
“I was hoping Poopsie had forgotten to take his refrigerator home.”
“Hungry huh?”
“Yeah.”
“Go down to the kitchen. There should be food there.”
“But it’s locked” I said.
“Not for the summer. Margaret leaves it open for the guys in summer school. There should be some left-over food in there.”
“Thanks Face?”
“No problem.”
He didn’t seem in a hurry to leave so I waited with him even though I was starving.
“How’s Strode?”
“He’s okay. He’s not in jail. He needs to stay home until the hearing anyway. Then who knows what will happen. I just hope he doesn’t have to go to jail.”
“I guess this guy he ... killed, was pretty bad huh?”
“I guess so. He had a record anyway.”
“Maybe they’ll go easy on Nick then.”
“Yeah maybe. I hope so.”
“Me too,” The Faceman said. “You and Strode have been friends for a long time haven’t you?”
“That’s right,” I said.
“Is he coming back to school next year?”
“I don’t know. Maybe not,” I lied.
“That girlfriend of his. She’d be worth coming back for wouldn’t she?”
“What?”
“She’s really something. She has a way of making a guy feel like no other girl does.”
“What do you mean?” I asked. My hunger had suddenly disappeared.
The Faceman smiled and shook his head.

“I had a class with her this spring,” he said. “I always sat next to her and we’d have coffee after class almost every day. She had a way of looking at me when we talked that made me think she was interested. Sometimes she’d touch me in just the right way, on the leg or on my shoulder, and it made me feel like … maybe if Strode weren’t around, that maybe she and I would have a chance together.”

My stomach started to turn.

“I don’t know,” The Faceman continued. “Maybe she’s just a big tease, but I have the feeling that if Strode were out of the picture she and I would get along just fine. She acted sometimes like she wouldn’t have minded getting together anyway, but I just couldn’t do it. I wouldn’t want to mess with Strode that’s for sure, and besides, it just didn’t seem like the right thing to do. But that girlfriend of his, she’s really something.”

I felt sick to my stomach.

“Maybe I’ll come back for a fifth year,” The Faceman said finally. “I know there’s something special between Leslie and me. She’s sent me plenty of signals, and with Strode gone, maybe I should come back.”

I turned away and staggered back toward the stairway.

“Hey Brooks,” The Faceman said.

I barely managed to turn around.

“Let me know if Nick is coming back,” he said. “Maybe I’ll see you next year.”
In the summer of ’73 a CAT scanner was used in London for the very first time. Nolan Ryan pitched his second no-hitter in the same season and Jack Nicklaus won his third PGA. The politicians ended the bombing in Cambodia and Vice President Spiro Agnew came under investigation for charges of bribery, extortion, tax fraud, and conspiracy related to kickbacks on government contracts in Maryland. Walter Sirica called for the surrender of the Watergate tapes, but president Nixon refused.

Meanwhile, I drove a combine along the northwest portion of the Harris place. The line of un-cut wheat stretched out in one monotonous curve after another, the rows of stalks hugging the contour of the hillside like a garter belt. Stiff stubble stretched downhill on my left, and tall golden unharvested stalks danced in the wind on my right. I couldn’t see anything but blue sky and white clouds, and of course the golden stalks of wheat that stretched out on the hills surrounding me.

I pulled up the header and pushed the hydrostat forward all the way. The combine groaned as the levelers adjusted and it traversed the hillside. The big machine spun around and then I dropped the header and pulled back on the hydrostat at the same time. The combine complained again as the levelers adjusted once more, and the collection of wheels, belts, and pulleys settled into the same monotonous pace they had traveled for most of the previous two weeks. Once the header was on-line, I looked up and saw the river.

It curved back and forth through the valleys between the hills. The sun bounced off of it, glinting from the little white caps that broke on the surface. It looked like a giant blue-green serpent covered with diamonds. It traveled as it always had … relentlessly, steadily, and unaffected by time or man.

The rhythm of the combine rumbled up through the seat of my pants and told me that all was well. I checked the height of the header one more time before letting my mind wander and looking back at the river.

Nick had taken a job in town. He hadn’t mentioned it until wheat harvest had already started. He said the pay was better and he needed permanent work. He needed to save more money now that he didn’t have a scholarship, but I’d felt my heart drop into my stomach the moment he’d told me. I’d taken his spot as the new “machine man,” but would have much preferred another few years on the truck with him in the combine.
He should have been much happier than he acted after the verdict. Second degree manslaughter was about as good as he could have expected, and the judge said he could go to school on probation, but even that didn't seem to cheer him up. He'd spent a lot of time by himself after the trial, and now I'd been left to a summer without him in the harvest. I'd called two nights ago and he'd agreed to meet me at a party some of his friends were having. I knew it was going to kill me to go to a party and then get up early the next day, but it was worth it. I hadn't seen him for two weeks. I looked back at the river.

The water disappeared between the hills to the northeast. I wondered what it did out there where I couldn't see it. I wondered if I'd ever get a chance to follow it all the way to where it ended. But maybe it didn't matter. If I couldn't follow it with Nick, then maybe I didn't want to go there anyway.

*****

We looked across the room through a haze of smoke and too-loud music at a boy and a girl who necked while they danced slow in the middle of the living room. She wore a short white tank-top and a pair of bellbottomed jeans with sandals. We could see the pale soft skin of her belly below the bottom of her shirt. She had her arms around his neck and he kept both of his palms planted firmly on the cheeks of her ass.

Annette sat on the lap of a big redneck guy near the opposite wall. She laughed and had another drink of beer while never taking her eyes off of Nick. She still looked good, and I had to wonder what she'd been doing in this little town for the past year. I took another drink of beer too, and wondered if this was as good as it would get for Nick.

After a few weeks on the construction crew I could see the routine starting to get old. They'd all drop by the local watering hole for a few hours, and then meet up with some of the local girls at somebody's house. They'd mingle around and hope they'd get lucky and drink more beer. Maybe they'd end up in their own bed or somebody else's with one of the girls from the night before. They'd have to get up and take care of their headache before they went back to work and did the same thing all over again. One or two years of this and Nick would look just like the rest of them. After five or ten years he'd blend right in and nobody would give a shit about any of the things he'd done. He'd be just another local redneck like the guy who was mauling Annette right now.

"The judge said I could go back to college," Nick said.

"That's good!"
“But I don’t have any money, and dad kicked me out when he heard I’d lost my scholarship. He says I’m on my own now.”

“You can stay at our house.”

“Thanks but I’ve already go a place. Did you tell anybody that I flunked Economics?”

“No.” I shook my head for emphasis.

He took another drink of his Coke.

“I guess I could go back to the university if I wanted to. I could spend a couple of years at the community college and work my way back there, but by the time I got back everybody would be gone ... you too.

We both pondered his options while the music rattled the thin walls and the beer spilled on the carpet and the girl in the white tank top stuck her tongue in the boy’s ear and ground her hips into his thigh.

“Do you think I should go to the community college?”

“Sure you should.”

“But I might still feel the same way I did when I took the tests at the university. What if that feeling doesn’t go away? Maybe college isn’t for me.”

“You’ll do fine at the community college,” I answered, but I thought the same thing. Maybe it didn’t matter where he went. Maybe the result would be the same.

“Whatever happens,” he said. “I’ve got to stay out of trouble. The Judge was real serious about that. He said if I stay out of trouble, every thing will be okay.”

I nodded my head as I swallowed my beer. “That shouldn’t be a problem,” I said.

“Hi Nick.”

We both looked up to see Annette. She'd cut her hair and gained a little weight, but her eyes looked just as blue and her teeth looked just as straight and white as they had last summer.

She moved close to him ... closer than she needed to.

“I haven't seen you since the last night of harvest. Do you remember?” she asked.

"I'm sorry Annette. I should have called you. I meant to, but I didn't get back to town much."

She laughed and tossed her head back and touched his forearm with her right hand.

"It's okay. I didn't expect you to call. I'm a big girl you know. I can take care of myself."

She laughed and moved closer still. She whispered something into his ear and Nick blushed.

“We can start over again right where we left off if you want to," I heard her say.
She leaned against him and her breasts squished against his arm. Her body looked the same as it had last summer ... hard and soft at the same time.

"I met somebody this year Annette," Nick said. "A girl at college. I've been dating her for almost a year."

"So?"

"Well ... I just have to think about it is all. I don't know if we'll keep dating. I don't know if we'll even keep seeing each other. Maybe it's best if we don't ... best for her at least."

She laughed again. "There's no need to act so grown up," she said. "Relax and enjoy yourself. Don't let a college girl spoil your summer. You should save some time for the local girls ... the girls who remember you and can take care of you the best."

I felt a flush in my loins as she pushed her breasts harder against Nick's arm. Leslie was the only girl in the world who could make a guy resist a girl like Annette.

"What the fuck are you doing Annette?"

Her body stiffened to the voice of the big redneck from out of town. He'd followed her over from the other side of the room. She introduced us but I didn't catch his name. Nick stuck his hand out but the redneck refused it. He grabbed Annette's arm and pulled her toward him.

"It's embarrassing for me to take you to a party and watch you flirt with every ass-hole in the crowd," he said.

"You offered me a ride and I took it," she said. "Don't make anything more out of it."

"That's okay," Nick said. "We're just friends."

"Fuck you asshole!"

"Stop it!" Annette said.

"I can take you home if you want," Nick said.

"She'll go home with me," the redneck said. Some of the spit in his mouth shot out in tiny droplets as he spoke. He smelled like cigarettes and stale beer.

"I'll go home with who I want," Annette said.

"Let's just cool off," Nick said.

"Fuck you asshole."

"You already said that," Nick responded. "You need a better vocabulary."

"Are you the local smart-ass?"

"Stop it!" Annette said again.

I looked from Annette to the redneck. He was a big guy ... two-thirty at least, but most of it fat, and all of it filled to the brim with bullshit. I knew the type, and they always made me flush
red-hot when I was around them. Nick hesitated as he watched the redneck glare at him. I pushed myself between the two of them.

"It's okay," I said. "We'll go get another beer."

I turned Nick around and pushed him away from the redneck but Annette wasn't quite finished.

"Remember," she said to Nick as we walked away. "We can start where we left off last summer."

I watched the redneck pull her away and wondered how a girl like Annette could end up at a party with a jerk like that. Nick and I walked through the crowded living room. The same couple still danced in the middle of the floor even though the music had stopped.

“What’s Leslie doing?” I asked.

“She’s spending the summer with her aunt at the university. She still thinks I’ll be coming back next year.”

“You haven’t told her about your scholarship?”

“Not yet.”

“When are you going to tell her?”

“I haven’t found the right time,” he said. “She’s got enough on her mind.”

We walked into the kitchen and I poured the rest of my beer down the drain of the sink. We both got our jackets and looked around the place one more time before we headed out the back door. I didn't see Annette or the redneck anywhere.

“Maybe college isn't for me after all,” Nick said, as we walked out the door and across the lawn. “Maybe I'll spend the rest of my life in this piss-ass little town and after a few years I'll be just another face in the crowd. No one will remember anything I've done.”

“Annette will remember,” I said, trying to cheer him up, and it worked, because he smiled for the first time that night.

“For a few more years she'll remember anyway," he said, as we turned around the corner of the house. “Some of the other people around here might remember for awhile too, but after awhile none of it will matter.”

We came around the side of the house and walked across the front lawn, and that was when we heard them arguing. There was the slap of a palm on skin, and then we heard his voice.

“You little bitch!” he said. “You need to learn some manners."
The redneck held Annette by the arm with his meaty left hand and he shook her like a rag doll. He raised his right hand to strike her again, but stopped at the sound of Nick’s voice.

"Let her go!"
They both turned toward us.
"Let her go and drive away," Nick said.
The redneck pulled Annette toward him. She winced in pain as her feet came up off the grass.

"And who the fuck are you to tell me what to do?" the redneck said.
"I don’t want any trouble."
"Then back off and mind your own business."
"I can’t have any trouble."
"Let her go," I said.
"Shut the fuck up pip squeak."
My heart was pounding.
"Why does trouble always find me?" Nick asked. “I can’t have any of this.”
I stepped in front of him.
"Let us take her home," I asked.
But he just sneered at me as he opened the passenger’s door and stuffed Annette into the seat. She tried to climb out but he took his big hand and jammed it into the center of her chest and stuffed her back into the car. She kicked him, but he deflected the blow and pushed her legs in with his foot.

“I can’t have any trouble,” Nick said behind me.
The redneck started to close the door on Annette and reach into his pocket for the keys. That was when I lowered my head and ran straight toward him. I buried my shoulder into his gut and heard him grunt, but he was too big to knock down. He bounced off of the open car door and I fell to the grass. I made it to my knees before he planted one of his fists into the back of my neck and flattened me. I rolled over and saw the heel of his boot headed right toward my eye.

He appeared out of nowhere, covering the distance so silently and swiftly that Annette and I were surprised to see him. His right hand reached over the top of the redneck’s left arm and clamped onto his wrist like a vise. He pulled up and rotated the wrist outward and at the same time swept the legs out from underneath the big fat prick like he was kicking an extra point. The redneck yelped out in pain as his wrist joint popped and he fell back. His head slammed into
the door panel just below the window, and he slid down onto his ass. He struggled to his knees and started screaming.

"I'll kill you... you son-of-a-bi......"

But he didn't get the last word out because Nick's fist came crashing into his nose so hard the bone snapped and redneck's head crashed back into door panel. He fell to the ground like the sack of shit he was, and Nick reached for Annette's arm.

"Let's go!" he said as he pulled her from the car.

I struggled to my feet and the three of us stumbled from the car into the open area of lawn on the parking strip. I looked back to see the redneck turning over onto his belly and crawling toward his car. He held his nose with his right hand, and blood dripped through his fingers onto the grass. He lifted himself up to his knees and reached into the glove box. Nick gave Annette a shove toward The Big Dodge.

"Get in the car," he said. "We'll take you home."

I heard the redneck spit blood.

"I've got something for you," he said.

We both turned around to see him leaning back against the passenger's side door. Blood ran down the front of his face and covered his shirt. The light from the glove box illuminated him as he staggered to maintain his balance and pointed the business end of a pistol at us. We both stopped in our tracks. It was the biggest goddamned revolver I'd ever seen. The hole in the end of it looked like the mouth of a cave. His hands shook as he slowly moved it back and forth between the two of us. Each time the end of the gun moved across the center of my chest, I stopped breathing. Annette stood motionless in the shadows by the car. None of us could speak. The redneck spit blood again. He pulled the hammer back and it sounded like a clap of thunder.

"You're not so tough now are you assholes?"

"Let's forget it," Nick said. "Let's just go home."

The redneck held the gun with both hands now. He wavered from right to left and the barrel of the gun moved with him, first toward Nick and then toward me. Back and forth the gun moved in a drunken dance of Russian Roulette until he rocked his head back and grunted.

"Fuck you, asshole."

I watched the flame jump out the end of the gun at the same time I felt an impact on my left shoulder. I heard a "thump," and landed on the ground. I reached across my chest expecting to find blood. The sound of the gun still bellowed in the night and then Nick fell down beside me. He rolled over and looked up into the stars and for an instant I wondered if it was a dream. Then
Annette screamed and knelt down beside him. She had her hands on his chest and she kept screaming and I felt frozen until I heard his voice.

“Brooks.”
I crawled to him and put my hands on top of Annette’s.
“I’m here,” I said.

The blood felt warm as it rushed up through Annette’s fingers and then through mine on its way to the ground. It bubbled out of his chest like a geyser. It spurted out in a river that neither of us could stop. I searched through the spaces in Annette’s fingers until I found the hole. I stuck the tip of my index finger into it but one finger wasn’t big enough. I put two and then three and then four fingers into the hole, but it still wasn’t enough.

“Will everything be all right?” he asked me.
My tears were mixing with Annette’s and then rushing away with the blood toward the grass. She’d stopped screaming and we both looked straight down into the hole in his chest. I heard the sound of tires spinning on asphalt and looked up to see the redneck’s car speeding away.

“Everything will be all right,” I heard myself say.
“My shirt feels warm,” he said.
“Everything will be all right,” I said again.
“I’m glad you’re here,” he said.

He looked up into the sky and his eyelids fluttered. He looked as though he had to work to keep them open.

“Where’s Orion?” he said. “I want to see Orion.”
“It’s in the south. It’s always in the southern sky.”
“The south … that’s right … you’ve told me that before.”
The blood was starting to slow down. The spurts came out less often and with much less force. His voice faded as the river of blood got smaller.

“I need to tell you something,” he said. He was working for every word. He grabbed my shirt collar and pulled me closer. I leaned down with my ear just inches from his mouth.

“She’s late,” he said
“What?”
“She’s late,” he whispered. “She’s late and she might be pregnant,” He took another deep breath and bubbles mixed with the blood as it came out onto the grass.
“I feel cold,” he said finally.
“Just rest,” I whispered. “I'll take care of everything.”

He smiled then, and closed his eyes and Annette and I stayed there on the lawn with him until the blood turned to clot between our fingers.
43
Crossroads

The Big Dodge maintained an uneven idle at the crossroads. It acted as if it were anxious to get started, as if it were impatient for me to make my decision. I looked again at the signs on the interstate, one labeled east and the other labeled west.

“It’s time,” I said again. “I can’t put it off any longer.”

I picked up the newspaper beside me and tried to read it. I still hadn’t been able to get through the whole thing. Every time I got started I ended up looking at the picture on the top of the page. It was his high school picture. The newspaper still had it on file, and it was the way everyone in town remembered him.

Local football hero Nick Strode was killed in an altercation following a private party last night. Witnesses at the scene claim Mr. Strode was shot in the chest after rescuing a woman who was being beaten in front of a local home. He died at the scene after resuscitation measures failed to revive him. The murderer was apprehended on the outskirts of town as he attempted escape.

Mr. Strode was recognized as perhaps the best high school athlete in state history. During his high school career he starred in football, wrestling, and track, with multiple state titles and records in each sport. He was on a football scholarship at the university at the time of his death.

“Nick was making real progress as a football player and we expected great contributions from him in the next few years,” Jim Fitzpatrick said in an interview this morning. “This will be a big loss for his teammates and the university.”

Fitzpatrick was reached in Texas where he is preparing his new team for its home opener next week. He left the university last June to accept a lucrative offer at the Texas school. His defensive assistant was promoted to the head coaching job at the University following his departure ………..

I dropped the newspaper back onto the front seat and picked up the sheet of paper lying next to it. It was postmarked from New York City and I’d read it twenty times at least, but I still hadn’t gotten tired of looking at it.

From the Office of Admissions
Juilliard School of Music
New York, NY

Dear Mr. Holmann

Thank you for your interest in the Juilliard School of Music. We are very impressed with your academic credentials and the tape you sent us, but as you know, we require a personal interview and audition prior to accepting new students.
We understand your situation and would be willing to consider you for admission if you can audition for us during the first week of September. After that, unfortunately, we will need to fill the available positions for the coming academic year. Please contact us for an appointment at the school. My phone number and address are included. We sincerely hope to hear from you.

I let the letter drop on top of the newspaper and looked up at the signs on the interstate again. I pointed the nose of the car toward the eastern exit and floored it.

The Big Dodge bellowed the instant the carburetor opened up, and it shot up the on-ramp like it was coming out of the barrel of a gun. The rear tires screamed as they searched for traction and tire smoke boiled up from behind the trunk. By the time I’d reached the end of the on-ramp she was doing sixty.

I kept my foot on the floor and watched the needle on the speedometer continue to climb. We accelerated down the freeway and when we hit the bridge over The Big River we were doing seventy-five and still climbing.

I looked over the edge of the bridge at the water. It was dark green this time of year, and the wind swirled it around in little currents and eddies that made waves that broke into white-tops as they got close to the shore. I heard the tires smack into each of the expansion joints as we crossed the bridge, moving farther and farther east. Whap-whap! … Whap-whap! We hit the last joint and the radio turned on.

By the time we came off the bridge we were doing eighty-five and the river was in my rear-view mirror. I looked from the road to the speedometer and then back into the mirror. The radio played loud and clear without a hint of it’s usual static.

Keep your head together
And call my name out loud
Soon, you’ll hear me knocking at your door. (7)

The speedometer climbed past ninety and the front end of the car started to shake. By the time we reached a hundred The Big River was rapidly getting smaller in the rearview mirror. The Big Dodge acted as if it were happy to run free. I couldn’t hold her back. She kept accelerating even though I’d lightened up on the gas pedal.

We were about a mile from the bridge when the numbers on the speedometer started to get hazy. I looked back at the road and blinked my eyes hard, trying to clear my vision. The river was just a small band of green now. It turned away toward the south as I steered The Big Dodge around a curve on the interstate. We’d settled out at one-fifteen and the steering wheel shook in
my hands with each crack in the asphalt. I looked back in the rear view mirror and I could barely see it. There was a sparkle of sunlight as it reflected off a whitecap in the middle of the water. The light bounced off of the wave and then into my eye … and then … just like that, The Big River was gone.

In 1974 the high school football stadium was re-dedicated in honor of Nick Strode. In the fall of 1983 an endowment was established in his name to finance an annual college scholarship. Among the locals who still gather at the barbershop, in the drugstore, and on the downtown street corners, he’s still considered the best there ever was.

**Brooks Holman** – Accepted into the Juilliard School in the fall of 1973. He left after two years to finish a degree in Biology at Columbia University. Attended medical school at Northwestern University. Received an inheritance after his parents died in an automobile accident the fall of 1983. He now lives in Sacramento where he practices Pediatrics. Married with three children.


**Leslie Cantrell** – Had her period in mid-September. Graduated in the spring of 1976 with a degree in marketing. She is currently a buyer for Nordstrom Department Stores in San Francisco, California. Divorced with two children.

**Annette** - Married to a local farmer since 1975. Two children.


**John Pursell** – Played for the Dallas Cowboys 1975-1976. Injured his knee in the spring of 1977 and was cut from the team. Had tryouts with the Minnesota Vikings in 1978 and the Denver Broncos in 1979 after rehabilitation, but he had lost a step and didn’t make either squad. Returned to the university in 1980 and graduated in 1981. He presently operates a sports bar in Eugene, Oregon.

**Woody** - Concrete contractor and salesman in Medford Oregon. Married with eight children.

**Crasher** - Class action lawyer, Denver Colorado.

**Big Wally** - Graduated in 1975. Married a plain-looking but wealthy woman ten years older than himself whom he met while working construction in Bend Oregon. He presently divides his time between Sun Valley, Idaho and Coronado, California when not traveling. They have no children.

**Booby** - Worked as a bartender in a strip bar in New Orleans where he met his first wife. They were divorced five years later in Las Vegas after having two children. Worked on a fishing boat in
Alaska for ten years and fathered three more children out of wedlock before disappearing to South America in 1992. Re-appeared in the states in 1995. He is presently a beer distributor in Boise Idaho.

**Cougar**- Pharmacist, Colfax, Washington. Three children

**Cowgirl** – Operates the family cattle ranch near Bozeman Montana. Never married.

**Dudley**– Pathologist, Asheville, North Carolina. Married with two children.

**Herbie**- Pharmaceutical salesman, Portland, Oregon. Married with no children.


**Moose**- Completed his doctorate in political science after losing half his tongue to surgery for squamous cell cancer in 1978. Presently teaches Political Science at a private college in Minnesota.

**Scott Morris**- A policeman in Moses Lake Washington. He owns two parrots. Never married.


**The Faceman**- Did not return for a fifth year at the university. Sold AMCO for five years. Filed bankruptcy in 1985. He is presently a used car salesman in Fresno, California.

**The Phantom**- Last visited the house in the spring of 1986. His identity remains a mystery.

**Trapper**- Hunting and fishing guide, Whitefish Montana.

**Poopsie**- Plastic Surgeon, Scottsdale, Arizona.

**Zeke**- Audio Consultant, Seattle, Washington

**Jim Fitzpatrick**- He had a three-year record of 21-11-1 in Texas before breaking his contract to accept a higher paying coaching position at an SEC school. He was fired midway through his second year with the team mired in the middle of a 2-6 season. Worked in the pros as a scout for eighteen years before retiring in 1995. Presently lives in Casper, Wyoming.
**The Redneck** - Sentenced to fifteen years in the State Penitentiary in 1973. Sold marijuana and hashish to the inmates and most of the guards for seven years before being released for good behavior in 1981. He obtained employment as a grade school night custodian with a sideline occupation as a drug dealer. Busted for possession of Cocaine with intent to sell in 1985 and sentenced to ten years. Killed in prison, 1989.

**The House** - Over seventeen hundred members graduated from the Sigma Tau House before it burned to the ground in 1998 when a candle was left unattended near a curtain in the old section. Insurance coverage was inadequate to reconstruct the building and attempts to raise additional money failed. The property was donated to the university in 2002.

**The River** - Three floods in ’76, ’82, and ’97. Navigation was extended inland for barges transporting wheat to the coast in 1986. Indian fishing rights were re-negotiated three different times in two different regions. One new bridge was constructed and two others were renovated. Two attempts to construct dams in the canyons to the east of the mountains were blocked in congress by intense pressure from environmental groups. A Natural Wildlife Habitat Preserve was established in the sub-alpine region in 1994. The river itself remains unchanged.

1. “Rockin’ Down the Highway,” Tom Johnston, The Doobie Brothers
2. “Beginnings,” R. Lamm, Chicago Transit Authority
3. “So Very Hard to Go,” Kupka/Castillo, Tower of Power
6. “Nothing You Can Do,” Gorrie/Stuart/Ball, Average White Band
7. “You’ve got a Friend,” Carole King

**Chapter Synopsis**

1. **Downstream.** We meet Brooks Holman. He drives beside the river, which he recognizes as a metaphor. His life has changed in the last year and he needs to make an important decision. He is at a crossroads in his life. He flashes back to tell the story. This is about something important. This is a big story.

2. **Harvest.** The story moves back a year in time. It’s mid-July and Brooks fanaticizes about the young harvest cook Annette as he drives his wheat combine. He knows he has no chance with her because she likes Nick better. All the girls like Nick. He stops the combine beside a parked loading truck and awakens Nick who’s asleep in the cab. They change jobs and banter like young guys do when they’ve known each other their whole life. After the combine leaves Brooks goes to sleep in the truck, but he awakens an hour later to find himself surrounded by a wheat fire. He instinctively jumps from the cab of the truck and becomes disoriented. He realizes he can’t escape the fire as the smoke begins to suffocate him.

3. **Nick Strode.** Nick risks his life without hesitation to save Brooks. This is a once in a lifetime friendship. Nick is a heroic figure

4. **The Big Dodge.** Brooks picks Nick up and they drive to the university for fraternity rush in Brooks newly purchased 1958 Dodge. There is a character sketch of Nick’s dad just
before they leave. He is a broken down ex-high school jock who lives his dreams through his son’s athletic achievements. He puts a lot of pressure on Nick and is more or a liability than an asset. The friendship between the boys is revealed through their conversation. Nick has depth and understanding, but he lacks the scholastic abilities of Brooks and he admires him for it. Brooks on the other hand, sees Nick as having everything he wants including plenty of attention from the chicks, whom Brooks is having increasing difficulty thinking about in anything but a sexual way. The girls are just a part of the uncertainties Brooks faces as he prepares to start college, and Nick makes all of it look easy. There is mutual admiration for sure, but it’s more than that. They have been best friends throughout their childhood, and they are permanently bonded by it.

5. Sigma Tau. Brooks stays at Nick’s fraternity house during rush. He meets Mitchell, a small-town guy with no first name who drives a customized Rambler, and John Pursell, the biggest man he’s ever seen. He’s reassured that there is a place for him at the Sigma Tau house. Nick has taken care of it.

6. Rush. Brooks and Mitchell visit the notorious Pi Beta Delta House during rush. An uninterested member shows them “Damien’s Room” which supposedly contains a poisonous snake. Only after they enter the room do they learn that the snake crawls around free in the room and may be anywhere. Brooks almost has a heart attack before Mitchell calls the bluff and shows his metal. When they return to the Sigma Tau house John Pursell asks to speak with Brooks in private and it doesn’t look good; Nick is waiting for him and he’s clearly upset. Brooks begins to wonder what life will be like at the university without Nick and the Sigma Tau House.

7. Screwed. Brooks and Mitchell get a good “screwing” when they are asked to join The House. Some of the members of Sigma Tau are introduced in the process. Cougar: the house steward whom is also the hairiest guy in the whole world. Crasher: a thin angular friend of Nick’s who wears thick glasses. The Faceman: a self-absorbed pretty boy from California who drives a Camaro. Booby: a lady’s man with long hair and a mustache who can drink more beer than anybody else in the house. And finally Dudley: A guy who’s so shy that he can’t bring himself to speak loud enough to be heard.

8. Wake Up. Brooks has wake up duty on the first day of school. He meets Woody, a senior who is an anatomic freak and impossible to wake up; and Margaret, the grizzled cook of the Sigma Tau house.

9. First Day. Brooks and Nick walk through campus on the first day of school. Nick has academic liabilities that he tries to express; but Brooks is too preoccupied to appreciate the significance of their discussion. They separate and a large Organic Chemistry class provides Brooks with his first safe haven since leaving home. Some of his strengths are revealed.

10. Tweener. Brooks watches Nick run wind sprints at football practice. He’s too slow for a skill position, and too small for the line. He has the heart and the ability to be a great player; but Brooks wonders if the coaching staff will be smart enough to give him a chance. They only look at size and speed, and Nick’s a “tweener,” caught in between the bigger and faster players on the team.

11. Current events. The regulars gather in the TV room and wait for dinner as they watch the news with Walter Cronkite. The Watergate scandal is breaking and some of the main players are being indicted. No one knows where it will lead. Nick tells Brooks that he’s met a girl.
The time setting is revealed for the first time in the story through the news. It’s mid-September of 1972.

12. **Saturday.** On a hot Saturday morning Brooks gets up close and personal with Cowgirl, a sorority girl from next door. He also meets Leslie Cantrell, the most attractive girl he’s ever seen. She also just happens to be his best friend’s new girlfriend.

13. **Zeke’s Stereo.** Zeke has the best stereo in the house, and he uses it to trick unsuspecting members of the Sigma Tau House. Brooks falls for the gag one day after lunch, and makes a self-discovery in the process.

14. **Scrimmage.** Brooks watches the defensive scout team scrimmage with the first team offense. Nick has a confrontation with one of the opposing linemen that gets him into trouble. It also makes Brooks realizes that the coaching staff is blind to Nick’s ability. He’s going to need some luck in order to get any playing time.

15. **Raunch Dinner.** It’s Friday night and there are no rules at the dinner table. Nick becomes convinced he needs to get bigger amid the food fights, Jell-O slurping, and recitations of “Piss Pot Pete.” Football is the most important thing in his life, and he’ll do whatever it takes to get the playing time he needs.

16. **Poker.** Brooks and Nick play poker with Margaret. She is a voice of wisdom and experience amongst the chaos of the Sigma Tau House. Brooks discovers that Nick has academic liabilities.

17. **Game Day.** Brooks attends the first game of the season with Margaret. Nick doesn’t play and Margaret blows her top. She knows, just as Brooks does, that Nick will never get his chance at the university. She is the only one to appreciate however, what it will do to him.

18. **The Phantom.** The Phantom is introduced. His presence generates a theory that puts an unlikely suspect under investigation. Brooks is falling for his best friend’s girlfriend.

19. **Testing Potatoes.** Cougar gives instructions to the kitchen crew on how to make instant potatoes. Brooks needs to find a date to the pledge dance after he learns that Nick will be there with Leslie Cantrell.

20. **Mid-terms.** Brooks takes his mid-term and feels empowered for the first time in his life.

21. **Pledge Dance.** Brooks is coming to the realization that he’s in love with Leslie Cantrell. He watches she and Nick at the Pledge dance and knows that he’s the odd man out. His talent is showcased and it captures the attention of one of the most beautiful girls on campus. Woody gets lucky. Mitchell never makes it to the dance.

22. **Poker.** Nick is starting to gain weight and his appearance is changing. Margaret is the only one to notice.

23. **Ashleigh Pierce.** She notices Brooks for the second time after he gets the highest grade in their chemistry class. Her interest will make him a campus celebrity.
24. **Six Weeks.** It’s late November and Nick is getting bigger but the coaches have not noticed. Word is out that Ashleigh Pierce is interested in Brooks. The Faceman calls six weeks. Nick’s personality is changing.

25. **Semester Break.** The boys return to school from semester break. Nick is getting bigger and stronger with each passing week. He hints again at academic liabilities but football continues to occupy most of his ambitions. Brooks realizes that their friendship is too strong to break apart. His future is linked to Nick’s.

26. **Exchange.** Brooks gets pulled down into the basement for one of the weekly house exchanges. He’s surprised to find Ashleigh Pierce attending such a raucous event, but Nick quickly deciphers her reason for being there and arranges a rendezvous between them. Brooks is suddenly a big man on campus thanks to Nick.

27. **Big Brother.** Passing through the gauntlet of his Big Brother initiation makes Brooks realize that for everything there is a season.

28. **Defending the Castle.** Nick goes unexplainably berserk during a snowball fight with the guys from the dorms. His personality is changing and it almost gets him hurt. The Big Dodge comes to the rescue.

29. **Mid term II** Brooks takes his zoology practical lab exam and daydreams about the possibilities in life. He’s been thinking about applying to the Juilliard School of Music, but can’t because it would mean leaving the university. Nick is struggling in his economics class. Brooks wonders how his ambitions and obligations can co-exist.

30. **Pledge Week (Hell Week).** Brooks staggers through hell week in a state of sleep deprivation. The year is moving too fast. He’s starting to realize that some of the seniors will soon be gone.

31. **Current events II.** Nixon, Watergate, and Vietnam dominate the news. The world is in chaos and it’s reflected in the weather as it wrestles with itself outside the TV room in early spring. There is change and separation in the future and neither Nick nor Brooks can stop it.

32. **Jigger a minute.** Nick enters the jigger a minute contest and loses a competition for the first time in his life. Brooks discovers a bottle of Dianabol in Nick’s shaving kit. Mitchell has some trouble with a Delta next door.

33. **Spring Break.** Nick and Brooks ride beside the river to campus in the back of Trappers pick up truck after Spring Break. Brooks confronts Nick about the Dianabol and they make a deal. Nick stops the steroids and Brooks promises to forget about the Juilliard School and stay at the university. Morris tries to figure out how to take a leak on the back of a pick up truck going seventy miles an hour in the rain.

34. **Seventy degree kegger.** Maxwell plays poker with Margaret in an attempt to learn her age and win the money that is about to be spent on the seventy degree kegger. Brooks gets lucky.
35. **Current events III.** It’s mid-April and senior rules have started. Watergate is pressing in around Nixon and metaphorically Nick feels the same thing. He’s unable to stop the change he knows is coming. The Phantom strikes again.

36. **Spring Luncheon.** Brooks eats lunch with Nick at Leslie’s house and realizes he’s fallen in love with his best friend’s girlfriend. Nick is losing weight off steroids. He’ll have a hard time getting the coaches attention during spring practice.

37. **Senior rules.** The seniors enter the sleeping porch for the conclusion of Senior Rules. It’s a clash of the titans as Nick attempts to throw out a drunken John Pursell. Brooks senses a changing of the guard.

38. **Spring Scrimmage** Brooks watches the final spring scrimmage with Leslie Cantrell. The coaches are overlooking Nick again and Leslie notices his lack of playing time. She also suggests that she might be interested in more than just a friendship with Brooks.

39. **The Roadhouse.** Brooks, Mitchell, Crasher and Nick go to a tavern after final exams. The crowd at the bar includes Michael Ruas, a notorious local tough guy who frequents the place and picks fights with college kids. He’s a predator who always finds a victim among the drunken crowd at The Roadhouse. He has a reputation as the best street fighter there is. In the process of blowing off some steam Brooks gets separated from Nick and ends up accidentally bumping into the wrong guy at the wrong time. Suddenly he’s in the parking lot with Michael Ruas living his worst nightmare. Nick shows up just as things get ugly and there’s an unavoidable confrontation.

40. **Warrior/God.** Ruas expects this night will be like all the others, but he soon learns that Nick is different. The fight becomes a violent contest that both of them almost seem to enjoy. For Ruas, Nick represents a college kid that can finally challenge him. For Nick it’s a chance to compete when the stakes are high, something he’s always been good at. Nick ends it with a chokehold. Brooks, Crasher, and Mitchell are unable to stop it in time, and Ruas asphyxiates in the parking lot with a fractured larynx.

41. **Northbound.** Brooks drives The Big Dodge north with Nick, Crasher, and Mitchell. He can only think to run away, but Nick sees the futility in it and persuades him to stop. He reveals that he has flunked his economics course for the second time and that Coach Fitzpatrick has revoked his football scholarship. He won’t be back to the university next year. Nick tells Brooks how much he loves him, and for the first time Brooks realizes that his admiration for Nick has always been mutual. They also both understand that they are on an unstoppable course of separation and change.

42. **Current events IV.** Brooks watches the news in a now empty TV room. It’s mid-June and he is the only person left in the Sigma Tau house. Nick is at home awaiting a hearing. The Faceman drops by The House for a last look around and wonders if he should come back to the university for a fifth year. He’s been seeing Leslie Cantrell behind Nick’s back, and he has been so enchanted by her that another year of school almost seems worth it. Brooks is mortified to hear The Faceman describe the same conversations, actions, and feelings that he thought were reserved for him. He realizes that maybe Leslie is just a consummate flirt.

43. **Summer of ‘73.** Brooks is working in wheat harvest. He watches from the top of the hill as The Big River winds back and forth through the valley and he wonders what his future
holds. Nick has taken a steady construction job in town and Brooks misses him, but he’s looking forward to seeing him that night. He hasn’t been around much since the death of Michael Ruas.

The story breaks to a party. Annette is there with a new guy from out of town. He’s a big blue-collar redneck and it’s clear that Annette is much more interested in Nick. Her flirtations with Nick causes a confrontation that Brooks defuses. Both of them are starting to realize that Nick is trapped on a dead-end street.

The boys leave the party and are forced to intervene when they find Annette being abused by the redneck. Brooks tries to handle the situation and spare Nick any involvement, but he’s not up to the task and ultimately Nick has to intervene. They rescue Annette but before they can escape the redneck pulls a pistol from the glove box of his car. He passes the big barrel of the gun back and forth between the two of them until it stops on the center of Brooks’s chest. The gun goes off and Brooks believes for an instant that he’s been shot, but Nick has lunged at the last minute pushing Brooks to the side and taking the slug in his chest. There’s nothing anybody can do. He dies on the spot.

44. Crossroads. The story ends right back where it started. Brooks is at the crossroads of his life wondering whether to go back to the university or try his luck with an audition at the Juilliard School. He makes his choice and points The Big Dodge down the interstate. He travels across the bridge and watches The Big River disappear in his rear view mirror. He’s not coming back. The river is a metaphor for their friendship.

Fraternities/Sororities

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Bands

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