

INSIDE DAD'S AUTO

By Willie Smith

"Get beyond panties?"

"Oh yeh."

"Get *in*?"

"A finger."

"Which one? How far?"

"Up to the palm. The middle. The *fuck you*. Happened naturally. Never gave it a thought. After it was in, all the way, asked myself why not the index? But the index seemed too *pointed*. The pinky ridiculous. Thumb too awkward to angle – me behind the wheel, she in the passenger seat. The ring finger notoriously has almost no independent control. No, the middle finger rose to the occasion. It is, after all, the longest; and the object of the mission is to explore this terra incognita as deeply as possible – right?"

"Wouldn't know. I'm the virgin here."

"Me too. Except for my left middle finger."

"Then she dumped you?"

I filled my mouth. Quickly lowered the bottle back under the dash. Swallowed three ounces of sticky sweet cheap. "We made out like that – parked – at least a dozen times. The affair lasted nearly six weeks. This was not a case of getting lucky for a night or a weekend. This was..."

Doug grinned out over the wheel, "Love?"

Between my knees I readjusted grip on the neck of the quart. "I don't know what that word means."

"Nobody does," he chuckled. Then blurted, "Does it smell like fish?"

"Scallops." I treated myself to another gulp.

"Rank?"

"No... yes; just enough to be..."

"Interesting?"

"*Fascinating*. Sweet, tart, musky, oily..."

Doug grunted. Lapsed into momentary absorption with his driving. Or perhaps into moody contemplation of a scent he did not have the privilege of remembering.

"So how did you do it?"

"Don't change the subject," he frowned, nudged into the left lane, accelerating to pass a stationwagon we had been coming up on the past two minutes. "Look at this geezer in the Pontiac. Eleven o'clock Tuesday night, no traffic anywhere, and he's doing under thirty in a forty-five."

"Maybe he figures the slower he drives the slower time will pass." As we shot by I caught a glimpse of a small wizened head under a greasy baseball cap. "Appears not much left on his clock. Were you going to use a gun? You said once your dad keeps a forty-five in the house."

"Guns are impersonal." He swung us back into the right lane, pushed it up to seventy, rapidly left the stationwagon far behind on the two-lane highway cut straight through bottomland. "I'm gonna get a bumpersticker says: *Gun owner? Show some guts – use a knife!*"

"You stabbed yourself?"

"Hanging." His face brightened as he grinned out into the thirty yards of tarmac the headlights continually ate. "I attempted to hang myself from a beam in the diningroom ceiling."

"The one your mom payed a bundle a couple years ago to have remodelers come in and expose, give it the Colonial look?"

"The one."

The car had crept up to what felt like eighty. I was too busy balancing the quart to steal a peek at the needle. It felt great. I hoped we were only doing eighty; because I looked forward to feeling ninety, maybe even the barely-imaginable one hundred.

"So - once you kicked the chair out from under - the rope broke, or it turned out to be too long? - just like in the funnies?"

"No." He pulled his foot off the pedal, and we dropped back to the fifty-five-ish we'd been doing since leaving the parkinglot at the halfway house. "I choked. I chickened out. Stood still. Just plain didn't do it."

"But...?"

"Dear Old Dad happened home early from the office. Caught me standing on his favorite straightback, neck through the noose; even had hands tied behind my back, as I was from the get-go afraid of not following through - hoped taking my hands out of it would make the deed that much easier to accomplish. In the event, all it did was render me helpless in the presence of DOD."

"Dod?"

"Dear Old Dad."

"Oh. So was DOD terrified, furious, dumbfounded - all of the above?"

"Sure. Underneath - mad, scared, ashamed. DOD, after all, *is* human. But the son of a bitch didn't miss a beat, right then and there, on the surface putting forth a command performance. 'Well, well,' the smug prick says, 'we *are* a danger to ourselves today, aren't we?' And he hops on the phone to 911. Has me ITA Bethesda psych faster than you can say *handjob*. My dad beats off. I caught him at it once."

"You told me." Gazing ahead at the double-yellow rolling into us, I weaved the screwtop to my lips, took a conversational sip. "When your mom was layed up in the hospital with her appendectomy."

"I don't mean," he swerved, but we hit - bump! bump! - anyway a headlightfrozen possum, "*then*. I caught him less than a year later down in the rec room jizzing the portable while his wife - my mother - stood upstairs reheating lunch."

"What was on?" I sipped again, held quart erect. "Lassie?"

"Nothing." Doug grunted. "He was wanking straight into the eye of a dead tv. I swear, the bastard is sick."

I shrugged. "What a career in the military will do."

"Career hell - it's genetic. I come from a long line of jackoffs."

"I've been known," I mused in cocky, yet maudlin, self-disclosure - tv actor on the eve of battle - "to touch it upon occasion myself."

"*Bien sur, mon ami* - but you are no forty-eight year old pater familias. A full Colonel in the US Army with the majority of his sex life behind him. You aren't going to throw up, are you?"

"What do you care?" I belched; exaggeratedly begged pardon. "This is my car. Belongs to Dad, I mean. My dad. A civilian employee attached for the past twenty-two years to the US Army, who is now on his livingroom couch dead drunk after a

routine Tuesday at his gray metal desk in a senseless bureaucracy. Men in their late forties living unfulfilled lives exhibit masturbatory tendencies. Bears shit in the woods. So?"

"Did she suck it?"

I held the grooved glass mouth pensively to my lower lip. Said half into the bottle, half at the windshield, "Once. As I accelerated onto the freeway, in this very car. We were driving home from parking along the river after a movie. She sort of toppled over. Her head drifted into my lap."

"Wow!" His foot touched it up toward seventy. "You experienced oral?"

"It was romantic. I wouldn't even be telling you this, she hadn't dumped me."

In his seat Doug squirmed. The Chevy lurched, swerved. The headlights revealed drainage ditch, barbed wire, green swath of cow pasture. Jerking the car back under control, the headlights leveling back on the tarmac, he croaked, "What's it feel like? I'm quite familiar with the hands on experience; I'm no self virgin. But – moist warm *suction*?"

"It was more," I tapped the glass neck on the padded dash – that same battle-tested actor toying with a captured potato masher – "more a dry kiss on the zipper."

"You never got it out?"

"I was driving."

He clucked tongue. Shook head slowly. Grunted in a tone that summoned up between us the queasy word *pantywaste*.

"So why didn't you have the guts to do the pelvic thrust would've toppled the straightback out from under your feet?"

"Don't be defensive. I'm not faulting you. I'm sneering at fate."

I glugged at the wine. Swallowed obstreperously – so as to scare away whatever fear it was that had swished *pantywaste* into the sink of my consciousness. Half the trouble in this world is caused by anticipating the other half of the trouble... "Fate I'd be all zipped up accelerating, craning my head to look for headlights in the lane I wanted, when she finally, for the first time in our entire relationship...?"

"Fate in a larger sense. The kismet that mandates the whole male-female disaster. Sex – whoever devised such a torture? Was it," he grinned maniacally, "the Armenians?"

"No, Doug. It was God. God invented sex. Don't you remember that testicle Eve ate in the garden? Picked it right off the ball tree, just like God told her not to."

"Please. I'm driving. Don't confuse me with Jewish fairy tales."

"Do they," I slurped the bottle's dregs; belched; "have you on drugs?"

"No." He frowned out over the wheel. "Just Librium, Elavil, Phenobarb; Seconal to get to sleep at night. Did you love her? – was she the cunt, I mean, that *fits*?"

"They say beware that one."

"The one that fits? Who are *they*?"

"Them's the kind scissors your balls off."

"No, no. That's the one that fits. I'm asking who are *they*?"

"Oh." I rolled down my window; flipped out the empty. "Common sense. Majority opinion." I ran the window back up. "You know – all the assholes in the world and you too."

"Did you just litter this beautiful farmland?"

"Sorry... maybe I shouldn't'a wolfed the whole bottle..."

"Don't worry," he grinned. "I love litter. Litter – perfect metaphor for life itself. Here we are littering the planet with replicas of ourselves. Go ahead, litter – perfectly natural human activity. The perfect fit."

"Hey, I was in love. I didn't get this girl pregnant. I mean, she did once say she wanted to have my baby. Fingerfucking evidently aroused her maternal instincts."

"Did she, like, drool or anything on your zipper?"

"Dry peck. Strictly."

"No more impact than a gnat, huh?"

"Actually... you must know... felt exactly like a grasshopper landed on my crotch. Stuck there a good long minute to mose around for something good to eat."

"Would you kindly shut up?" He squirmed around in the seat, keeping a grip on the wheel with his left hand, while the right plundered his crotch. "You're making my balls itch. *Ta gueule!*"

Doug had lived two years in France. Unlike most Army brats he had attended an off-base French high school. He boasted a splendid Parisian accent, and was something just this side of fluent. He took a sardonic pleasure in telling people to shut up in French. He enjoyed greeting me with his own personally concocted *Salut, salaud!* [Hi, bastard!]. I'd had four years of American high school French. As long as he kept it to no more than two or three words, I understood well enough.

The headlights swallowed another mile or two of flat highway. I decided to prove how drunk I wasn't by staring silently ten yards ahead at the speeding tarmac.

"How long," he finally said, as the silence was becoming claustrophobic, "did her head stay down? Just till you got your lane?"

"I dunno... did you remain standing on the chair till the medics arrived?"

"Of course!" He glared over at me like I was crazy. "I had to. My hands were tied. If I jumped off the chair I'd've killed myself."

"Yeh. OK. Well... I got my lane. Kicked it up to seventy... she's still down there under the wheel, in my lap."

"Are you by now – inside your pants of course – fully erect?"

"Well..."

"This car is an automatic; but it's starting to feel like a stick shift – right?"

I grabbed compulsively for the bottle no longer present. Slowly unclenched empty fist. "OK – it amounted to a *couple* dry pecks; interspersed with a certain amount of moving around – like getting comfortable on a pillow. I blew it when I took a hand off the wheel; lowered the palm onto her head; just thought I'd run fingers through ringlets. She got a permanent earlier that day – presumably with our date in mind."

"You *blew* it?"

"OK, Sigmund." I hiccupped. "There are no mistakes. Every slip intentional. Let's just say I browned it. Outta the frying pan and into the pun. Look – you want a blow by blow account? I'm only telling you this accounta she dumped me."

"You already said that. Dumped you out of the pan before she was properly browned."

"How close," I hiccupped, "were you?"

"This kiss and tell smacks of revenge, *n'est-ce pas?* Albeit you know my lips are sealed. Although only in death are lips ever sealed; rotted away, at any rate. But I'm ugly, overweight, mentally unstable, have no friends – your immaculate blowjob is safer with me than with any other cad in the school district."

"How close, Doug? And hey – I'm your," I hiccupped, "we're friends."

"We stimulate each other intellectually. I'm not in touch with my feelings. How could anyone not in touch with his own feelings have friends?" He glanced over at me through his thick-lensed black plastic-frame glasses. His fat freckly face looked serious, or at least seriously feigning seriousness; I never knew when Doug was serious; he didn't seem to either. "Close to what?"

"To suicide." I hiccupped. "Exactly how numb do you expect me to think *is* that acromegalic skull of yours?"

"Oh." He popped on the brights, flooding more of the highway, ditches, fences into view. "The shrink thinks it unlikely I'll repeat – provided I continue in therapy, stay on the medication."

"I'm not talking *now*. I mean last week, when you perched on that chair, before," I hiccupped, "your dad happened in to provide you with an out."

"He actually made me feel more like killing myself."

"I thought you were out of touch with your feelings?"

"Suicide isn't a feeling. It's a destination. I dunno... close as a pilgrim contemplating a map, slowly realizing it's not a map at all; just a blank sheet of typing paper."

"Leave a note?"

"Well... no." He snapped off the brights. "I wanted the family to wonder. Besides, my whole life – tonight included – is one long endless suicide note."

"A note is something dashed off, brief, disconnected..."

"Yeh." He grinned out over the wheel at the flat, inexhaustible highway. "That's what I said."

"Nausea washed over me. To rise above the vertigo I blurted, "Wish I'd raped her. I mean, if I knew she was gonna dump me anyway..."

"She lettered in field hockey. She's first string center girls basketball. You're no more in shape than yours flabbily – pocketpool champ, bookworm chump, heavy thought lifter, serious mind bender. I doubt you could take her. What did she ever see in a ninety-pound weakling like you anyway?"

"She's an honor student." I sat on a hiccup – used the suppression like a surfboard to ride out the nausea. "She'll do well in college. Be a bank vice president, chairman... chair*woman*... of some... board."

"And you'll be?"

"Oh... another sixty years of rambling, unfinished suicide note."

"And I'll be," he popped buttons on the dash to replace the headlights with the parkinglights, "damned."

"Don't be so dramatic." The dim bulbs lit almost nothing of the road ahead. "You're not mean enough to be damned. People out of touch with their feelings just get recycled. You'll come back as the same damn thing."

"And that isn't," he squinted, hunched further over the wheel, "hell?"

"*Why, this is hell; nor am I out of it* – isn't that what Mephistopheles says?"

"By the way," he sat back up straight, "don't get the idea I don't touch it. My sex life, you see, is a very touching tale." He chuckled, chortled, half choked on his own joke. "*Selftouching!*"

"So what are you doing," a painful cross between a hiccup and a belch wrenched up from my throat, shook my body like a sob, "now? Feeling your way in the dark?"

"Right!" he guffawed. "Navigation via masturbation!"

I gazed a moment out the passenger window at the night. Then turned back and said drunkenly, "I, too, can be self-destructive."

"Oh yes," he nodded at the windshield. "You certainly drink that way."

"Hey... this my first time. Gimme a chance. Ten years ahead I may yet evolve into a highly successful social drinker. Besides, I just got dumped. I deserve to get sloppy till my tits hang out."

"Why, this is self-pity – nor are you out of it."

He killed the parkinglights. We continued at a steady pace our plunge into the night. I glanced again out the side window – the view now utterly black. Dimly I retrieved from short-term what must have been side-glow from the parkinglights. Gray static my memory probably was exaggerating. This present true blackness strangely peaceful, reassuring... But was it, in turn, truly *blackness*?

"No. What I meant was," I looked back over at Doug's shadowy form, lit now only in instrument lights, "I get self-destructive at home. When my dad rages drunk through the house. Hate it when he does that. Identical rage runs through my blood. Dad's rage in action awakened my congenital rage. As a kid I had nothing permissible to rage against. So I learned self-rage. I'd lie in bed hating my drunken father's guts. Unable to act it out. Gnashing teeth imagining kicking him in the neck, so his florid head explodes in blood, brain, bone. I hate my dad so much I have gnashed the enamel off my teeth. Next week I go in for two root canals. Gnashed the nerves of a couple molars to death. I... guess," I spat at the black window, "you could say this getting dumped called up..."

"Are you puking? I won't tolerate puking. Roll down the window if..."

I watched foam ooze across glass. "That's how come you jack off. You so much hate your own dad the choked rage manifests as chronic self-abuse. Obvious as this bile crawling up my throat right now. We are both father haters – patricides waiting in the wings. Because our progenitors belong to the Army. How did you picture the Army – when as a toddler you first heard the word?"

"Why don't you roll the window down. Stick your head out. Get some air you won't maybe need to puke."

"A buncha guys concentrating nervously on some very serious stuff involving guns and bombs. That's how I pictured it. We actually lived on base till I was seven – when they finally excluded civilians from military housing."

"See?" The Chevy again began to accelerate. "Exactly my point – who are *they*?"

"They?"

"The *they* who threw you off the base, so you could no longer, past age seven, enjoy such privileges and perks as low rent and PX shopping?"

"Jerks, I guess. Actually just a construction to avoid the passive voice; no need to get excited. What time you gotta get back to the halfway?"

"Would you please open your window?"

"Look – I'm not going to," I angrily cranked down the glass, "going to..." stuck my head out, puked. Coughed and spat a few times. Pulled my head back in from the uproar of the slipstream. Buttoned up the window. Cleared my throat, saying, "So what time?"

"I dunno – how long does a movie last? Did you get any on the door?"

"A hundred-twenty minutes. Fifteen to get there. Fifteen back. Factor in popcorn. Call it three hours. What do you care? Not your vehicle. This car belongs to the jerk cursed me with these alcoholic genes. I took you to a movie?"

"They don't let me out just to drive my friend around so he can get drunk because he got dumped."

"Thought you had no friends."

"All right – my intellectual foil and fellow victim of *weltschmerz*, *ennui*, *abulia*, *angst*."

"Never knew you were so fond of me."

"I'm not. Especially when you make the car smell like puke. Could you leave that window *down*?"

"Here comes another car."

"Yeh. I see it."

"Turn on your lights – he can't see you."

"Doesn't matter. I see him."

"He's flashing brights. He sees you now!"

"OK – long as he can see me I don't need to look. I'll just turn my head like this and we can continue our conversation face to face. Don't look so worried – I'll hold the wheel steady. I don't need to look out the windshield to hold the wheel."

"C'mon, Doug. Turn on your lights and pay attention to the road. You trying to get me sober? OK. It worked. I'm sober. Now turn on the lights, look where you are going and drive accordingly."

"Please?" he leered into my face.

The oncoming driver leaned on his horn.

"Please drive the fucking car!"

"Sure." He swiveled his head back out over the wheel. "That's no problem."

We swerved. Missed by inches the black Buick four-door hammering down on us at a combined speed of over one hundred miles-per-hour, driver blaring horn all the way, horn still dying a violent doppler death behind us, as Doug continued:

"If you don't mind, though, I'll keep the lights off. It's so much more restful on the eyes to drive in the dark. Would you mind rolling that window down? Your breath stinks like puke."

I rolled my window all the way down, saying, "I got all the puke outside on the highway back there. Besides, it's part of the deal – when you drive a guy around so he can get drunk for the first time you gotta expect a little vomit. Do you think of your dad when you jerk off?"

"No. Just of how much I hate him. He's not there. Just the hate."

"So when you start to think of how much you hate your father, you pull it out and wank?"

"It's not that simple. First the hate – through a series of meditations – transforms into lust. Then I distill from the lust a favorite fantasy – such as screwing my mother to death with a baseball bat."

"Of course." I wished for more wine. "The Orestes complex superimposed on an Oedipus. Does your sister Ellen play a part?"

"*Bien sûr*. I often imagine – while jerking off – bobsledding with her. We fly off the track. Launch into the air. Get naked. I'm on top. After fifteen seconds of the Hump of the Century we smash into the wall of a castle and are killed instantly. No, you see: the gods *are* the emotions. The emotions are the gods. Can't Mars become Venus, Ares penetrate Aphrodite, Jehovah merge with the Virgin? Why is it therefore so hard to believe hate can switch to lust or vice versa?"

"*Hard? Vice?* Look who's talking no mistakes. Doug, I think your Freudian camisole is showing."

"I can't help it. I hate the bastard. Hate him so hard, makes me wanna fuck Mom in the ass to death with a baseball bat."

"You are one sick motherfucker."

"Thank you."

"The *mother* of all motherfuckers."

"Hey – *ta gueule!*"

"Hit a nerve?"

"No. You hit an impossibility. You see, I hate my mother – the sniveling duplicitous bitch. Hysteria Queen, Empirin Empress, Goddess of Supermarket Gaga!"

"But didn't you just lecture hate is no impediment to lust?"

"Lust, sure – but not *fucking!*"

"Lust is confined to fantasies?"

"This is not to say," he slowed to a sane twenty-five, as it became dimly apparent we were entering some curves, as the highway sloped toward the river, "not to say one doesn't experience fantasies during coitus."

"This is a virgin talking."

He glanced over in the dark. "You don't need to experience coitus to know what it's all about. Sex is blood-programmed, instinctive. It's parenthood that requires tutoring. And," he popped on the headlights, "of course there are no tutors. Not even God knows how to be a parent. Consider the mess in the Garden – ever see such a display of poor parenting as Yahweh exhibits? He catches his children in the midst of discovering the joys of sexual congress. What's he do? – Out, you little bastards! You're disinherited, both of you, ya filthy degenerate beasts! The Christians are right – we are fallen, all fallen; even God is fallen."

"Suicide the only hope?"

"Suicide is too rational. Too mundane. Too bourgeois." He swerved onto the gravelly shoulder that showed an abrupt drop into a ditch; jerked it back onto the tarmac. "Or is that medication talking? What's needed, *de toute façon*, is something mystical – a ritual never before enacted, a *danse macabre* fresher than the concept *birth*. A joyous acceptance of holocaust."

"Mass hypnotic suicide?"

"Yeh... kinda. Go back and shotgun grandma. Better never to have been born. Pre-uterine suicide the only answer. Pre-uterine suicide!" He guffawed, grinning, slamming the heels of his palms against the wheel. "Kill me before I was multiplied!"

"But you're a fake. You choked."

"I know. I'm a phony. How come I want to kill myself – not only is the entire universe fake, but I am, too."

"It's not the medication, Doug. It's genuine – you're trapped. So am I. I'm a displaced fingerfucker and you're a failed suicide."

"The juice from thawing scallops, you mean?"

"Yeh – like when you pick up a package in Safeway and it leaks onto your fingers."

"I wouldn't know. My mom does the food shopping."

"Mine too. But I useta as a small boy tag along. It's an old memory."

"Old as feces. Scallops. *Bien sûr, bien sûr.*"

"Hey..." I glanced over at his bulky shoulders rounded apeline over the wheel, now better illuminated by light the highway threw back from the headlights... "You're not gonna use my chatter as fodder for jerkoff fantasies?"

"You think I'm driving you around for free? Look – you were unlucky in love. But now – thanks to your chauffeur – you got lucky with wine."

"Oh?"

"You're still alive. Apparently you failed to get any vomit on the car. You're not even in the hospital yet."

"What are those lights in the rearview? They just started flashing – is it a cop?"

He frowned up at the rearview. Squinted. Shook his head, "No."

"Sure?"

"Oh no – it is merely the tooth fairy on one of her fabled late-night missions." He got back to his driving, grinned out over the wheel. "Of course it's the cops – who the fuck did you think?"

"Wait..." I hiccupped. "I know Daphne changes into a laurel, Arachne into a spider, Mergus the merganser, Myrrha the myrrh tree. Because *The Metamorphoses* tells me so. But on what authority do you claim Mars can merge into Venus, much less versa vice?"

"On the authority of analogy. Everything in this world is a metaphor. Goethe tells us that. Everything in the universe stands for something else. Look – what happens when this cop pulls us over? I don't have a license."

"What?"

"DOD won't let me get one. Because I can't yet parallel park with sufficient exactitude. We could change places. I'll scoot over, you slide over top of me."

"But I'm drunk. That was the whole idea – you drive while I get safely drunk!"

"Well, the best layed wives of mice and men gang oft... here he comes! I'm pulling over..."

The Chevy bumped and rumbled over the narrow shoulder, Doug bringing it to a halt after thirty yards of dusty gravel. As the car was stopping, the police cruiser roared past at full tilt. It's flashing ruby and sapphire lights disappeared around a bend a hundred yards ahead of where we leaned motionless on the edge of the ditch.

"Oh. I guess he doesn't want us after all."

"Nobody wants us."

"Now *that* is alcohol talking. Just because some slut of a jock honor student threw you out of her pants..."

"Hey – that's my girlfriend you're slurring!"

"Not since she took up with the varsity quarterback; who passes courses on the basis of chiseled Anglo-Saxon features and timely touchdown completions. And you with the best grades in the school. Nobody has a higher grade point. I'd say the bitch traded down."

"But I think I still love..."

"*Merde alors!* Love has nothing to do with *thinking*. Love is a certainty like no other certainty. You can be certain the interior angles of any triangle sum to 180 degrees. But the certainty of love is qualitatively beyond geometric certainty – because love is alien to thought."

"How would you know? You're a virgin. You've never loved."

"Yes," he grinned at the windshield, "but I've thought about it a lot."

"But I thought you said thinking..."

"I've thought about love mystically – alchemically, mythologically. Mythical thought isn't *thought*."

"Oh?"

"It's pictures."

"The way you picture screwing your mother to death anally with a Louisville Slugger?"

"Exactly." He snapped off the emergency, took his foot off the brake, looked around, eased the Chevy back onto the road. "Love is the geometry that underlies fantasies."

"I thought that cop must be after us because of your erratic driving."

"I wasn't driving," the car lurched into the bend the cop had disappeared around, "erratically. I was driving mystically."

"It's mystical you kept *missing* things. And hey, wait – earlier back there somewhere on the road you claimed nobody knows the meaning of love. Now you drag geometry into the metaphor."

"Euclid in drag? Triangular faggots? Metaphors mix; they don't *crossdress*. Look – my balls are starting to itch again. But, no – I meant, and plainly said, the meaning of *love* is by definition a mystery. Which in no way denies that love underlies fantasy. Thus people making love fantasize about someone else other than the person they are screwing. Because sex is so screwed up only love can straighten it out."

"When we get down to the river, would you please just drive the car into the water?"

"Oh no. In fact," he cocked his left arm above the wheel, looked down at an imaginary watch, "the movie just got out. I think we better start back."

Now I thought about it, it did seem enough time had elapsed for a movie.

Doug executed a sharp U that flung me against the passenger door. All four tires screeched. My stomach struggled to match the momentum flipflop. I felt the hapless organ search desperately for anything left it could possibly eject.

He wriggled in his seat. Cleared his throat. Sat back straight, arms fully extended onto the wheel. "So what movie did we see?"

I fought back stomach acid, head hung in silence.

"What's playing where – do we know? We need to get our stories straight, synchronize watches, all that. We can't have the nurse at the halfway think we just drove down to the river and blew each other."

"I... I," I said, "I think *Night of the Living Dead* is at the," I belched, winced at bile spray the back of my throat, "Edgemont."

"That stupid piece of shit? Are you gonna puke again?"

"Possibly. You've seen it?"

"Just overheard people summarize it in the hall between classes. I never see movies. I'd rather stay home and masturbate. My fantasies are better directed, better acted, provide me with more original ideas to mull over."

"What – the same fantasies over and over?"

"Oh no. Sometimes the baseball bat is a spitting cobra, or a proton beam, or a coprolite dildo. Sometimes Mumsie sports a string bikini, sometimes an American flag mumu. Just last night I knelt behind Sis while she belted the Anthem up Mumsie's vulva. A seventy-six piece band blared, and she sang in tune, but the words were all from Kubla Kahn. With her face jammed into Mother's muff I could only pick out every fifth word: ... *Kubla... pleasure... Alph... caverns...*"

"Hey – why does an alibi even matter? We won't get grilled. You'll park in the lot. Get out. I scoot over. You wave ta-ta under the porch light. I drive off."

"Not always that simple. Before they unlock the door and let me in, they can require the chaperone – that's you – to step inside to debrief. You know – where'd we go, what do, did I behave myself? I've been a resident five days and it hasn't happened yet; but it's in the house rules posted in the hallway beside the front door. And this is," he sneered, "the first time I've been out since entering the facility. Just did this as a favor to my intellectual peer."

"I can't go in with you. They'll see I'm too drunk to drive. Lock me up for the night."

"They have no authority over you."

"Then they'll call the cops and the cops will lock me up in a worse place."

"OK. It won't happen. I'm being paranoid. But let's perfect the alibi. Never hurts to have an alibi. Every minute of your life you should have an alibi – just in case. Take right now: I was driving the vehicle, officer; I couldn't possibly have thrown that wine bottle out onto the passenger side of the road."

"That happened over an hour ago! Although, come to think of it, it was right about here; on the opposite shoulder."

"I speak hypothetically, *mon ami*."

"*Hypodermically*, said the punk to the drunk, as their junker plunked a skunk."

"Actually I believe it was an opossum. But that's why I failed at suicide. Because – stood on the edge of the chair – a hypothetical error became apparent."

"Hypothetical?"

"An error in the hypothesis. The error itself *real*. Securing the rope to the beam, arranging the chair, climbing up on the chair, tying hands, threading head through noose... the whole time I'd been gloating over the note. I was lying a moment ago; attempting to save face. Sure – I left a note. I'm that much of a conformist."

"You're the most normal guy I know, Doug." A remark I would've loved to've punctuated with a gulp of cheap wine straight from the bottle.

"Typed it on my portable Hermes. Kindly allow me to quote: 'You people drove me to this. How can people like you stand to go on living? If this encourages you to commit suicide – any of you assholes – then I shall not have died in vain.' *Tiens!* Isn't that the finest suicide note you ever heard?"

"Definitely," I agreed, because getting him to shut up would definitely be too difficult. Quietly I rolled the window back up.

"Can you feel the anger transmute into despair? There is no hope even to *abandon*. And it didn't take long to write. Just something dashed off the night before, when I was having trouble sleeping, anticipating the next day's hanging. Quick to memorize, too. The original is still in my suitcase at the halfway. Would you like a Xerox copy for your files?"

About a mile ahead headlights appeared.

"Why do you think she dumped me?"

"Huh?" He glanced over, then shot his eyes back out on the highway. "Oh. Well – should I spare your feelings?"

"I'm asking you because you're a nut, an asshole, a lone wolf – I want the truth. I need to know. Because..."

"Because tonight you're a lone wolf psycho yourself. This night's very own Mr. Self Destructo. Let me finish first: So I'm on the edge of the chair, my head a

chad hanging from my ticket out, and it finally dawns: I won't be there to watch their faces as they read the note."

"Simple enough realization."

"I know – can you believe it took that long to sink in?"

I gazed at the distant headlights brighten and spread apart as they approached. "I can believe it. Being dumped still hasn't sunk..."

"Isn't it marvelous how irrationally we go along in life, till, in an instant, the veil lifts, and we perceive the insanity of our situation? Then proceed to praise this flash of logic as *insight*, when in fact it might make more sense to marvel at the days, the weeks, the years it took for this scrap of *duh* to float up into consciousness? Why does anybody think – much less brag – intelligent life exists on this planet? So I failed to kill myself because the whole shebang suddenly seemed stupid, and the stupidest move seemed to be to hold still and wait for somebody to catch me standing there."

"Did she dump me because, despite all those A's, I'm in reality *stupid*? Shouldn't we maybe be in the other lane?"

"On the contrary, you're too aware. You obey all the rules. You don't even jaywalk. How come you get those top grades. Girls go for guys who break the rules. You got dumped for failure to revolt. This is the right lane, don't worry."

"The quarterback breaks the rules? As a matter of fact this is the left lane; which is decidedly *not* the right lane, OK?"

"Don't get uptight. The road's smoother in this lane. Too many bumps over in the right. Well, yeah... maybe he just has a large penis. He *is* better looking, better built."

"Yeah, but somebody is *coming*, you idiot!"

"Hey, c'mon," he glanced over. "My IQ is 160. I'm actually an extraordinarily intelligent suicidal maniac."

"OK. Look... *please*?"

He swerved right. Three seconds later, the approaching vehicle roared past – a blue station wagon cruising under thirty; a slight elderly party with a baseball cap at the wheel.

"It's him – that old guy," I said without thinking; then thought, and added, "How can that be?"

"Maybe he stopped to mend a fence. You sure it's the same guy, the slowpoke? Whatever, I was enjoying the one-sided chicken. He must be blind not to see us. He didn't react at all. Just kept coming. But you needn't have worried. I was going to chicken out; just a second or two later than when you begged me. I certainly didn't want us to get killed. Not when there's an alibi to tell. I *will* be able to watch the nurse's face when I lie about *The Body Snatchers*."

"*Night of the Living Dead*."

"That's a stupid movie. Don't you find *Body Snatchers* more appropriate?"

"You know," I gazed what I imagined was *wistfully* out the passenger window, "sometimes I get ecstatic hating my dad."

I sensed his right arm raise. A snap, then soft yellowish interior illumination, told me he had switched on the dome light. "Now what is that but Ares switched into Aphrodite? Anger metamorphosed into lust, caterpillar spite become butterfly orgasm? Check out your face reflected in the window – is it ecstasy?"

I let my concentration drift, till the dim image – with the night behind it – settled into focus. The features were obscure. Eyes hollowed. Dark hair blended into the blackness of the speeding roadside. Lips blurred in the shadow of a large

nose. But the familiar face seemed to be decidedly, if faintly, expressing... nothing. Nothing to the nth.

"Well, no." I sighed at the image ghosted on the glass. "A little tired, a little drunk, a little distant... mostly a pile of nothing. I could be anybody lost in a crowd – probably male, maybe eighteen, Tuesday night rolling over into Wednesday."

"Describe once more your progenitor. Sketch his character. Help me get a grip on this *extase*."

"Dad resembles Rumpelstiltskin." I looked back out, through the windshield, at the nothing on the highway. "In his drunken rages he symbolically stamps a foot through the floor; grabs the other foot in both hands; jerks up; rips himself apart. He is furious both with the world and with himself. Dad wouldn't stop at suicide – he'd do murder-suicide. But, like your own dad, like all rat-eyed bureaucrats, he lacks guts. So he daily dies the life of a catatonic Rumpelstiltskin. Mine with alcoholic rage, yours with ultra-sober petty pickiness."

"Paper asses," he sneered; one of Doug's pet words; from *paperassier* – argot for bureaucrat. "Paper ass lifers."

"What makes us," I considered shrugging, but couldn't muster the effort, "any better?"

Out of the corner of my eye I glimpsed him shrug. Felt the Chevy slow to something approaching the limit. After a relatively sane quarter-mile of silence he said, "Nothing."

"*Our father who art behind the desk,*" I recited. "*One penis, above testicles, with paycheck and health insurance for all. Hollow be thy name. Thy retirement come, thy will be done, on television as it is in Winnebago.*" Then squirmed in my seat – butt gone to sleep. "I come from a long line of paper asses. My grandfather was a paper ass at the post office."

"It's in our genes." He squirmed in his own seat, jerked at pants, tucked in shirt. "Hey – I gotta get outta here."

"Well, stop the car first. You gotta piss?"

"I mean out of this halfway. My own grandfather worked for the War Department, right across the river in D.C. He did something with typewriters and filing cabinets; I believe a telephone was also intimately involved. But whatever," he shook his head, "I gotta get my diploma, go to college, settle down and become a paper ass. I mean, why kill yourself when it's so easy to commit suicide all your life anyway?"

"Guess," I hiccupped, "I need to forget that jockstrap bimbo. She *just* got into the honor society... barely maintains a three point... lovely tits, though. She'd let me undo her bra. Firm, soft, fresh – newborn kittens filling up my palms. Her tits *purred*..."

"You're making my balls itch. Besides, how are you going to forget her if you persist in drunkenly obsessing on her anatomy? Turn on the radio, OK?"

I clicked to life the illuminated dial. Punched any old station.

"Another 218 Americans," a DJ squawked, "were killed this week in Viet Nam. Weather tonight: muggy, low around eighty; tomorrow partly cloudy, highs in the upper nineties with high humidity. Now it's on to number one on radio WEEM's hit parade – The Doors' *Light My Fire!*"

"Is this the one that goes on and on?"

"What – the war or the song?"

The song that went on and on slowly and ominously began. "Maybe," I hiccupped. "Maybe I meant the interminable heat and humidity; isn't even yet the end of May. Does the personality," I hiccupped, "survive death?"

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"I just want your opinion."

"No." He frowned through the windshield. "Why should it? In some sense I'm sure there's something after death; but why would it have anything to do with the personality, the ego, our personal thoughts, sensations, memories – what the hell do you think I was trying to escape with that rope?"

"You just don't have the personality to go through with it."

"Just like you don't have the personality to keep the jockstrap chick interested."

"OK" I heaved a sigh a hiccup cut short. "Let's just shut up and listen to this stupid song."

A few minutes later we pulled into the modest parkinglot beside the three-storey frame halfway. Doug killed, with a twist of the wrist, the endless song – beheading in mid-circus an electric organ solo; jerked on the emergency; left the motor running.

He exited the car. I slid over under the wheel. He leaned his head back in through the window, which he had rolled down just as he was pulling us out onto the highway, over two hours ago. "What's the name of that guy who sings that song that goes on and on?"

"I dunno." I fished for the emergency; found the handle; disengaged it. "I hate rock and roll. Listen strictly to classical; sometimes a little jazz."

"He has a great voice. He's wasting his time with this music for sex organs. He should be running for President. Look – I'll see you in French tomorrow."

"They're going to let you resume classes?"

"The choice is up to me. It's always been up to me. This is a," he jerked his crewcut head back at the former boarding house converted into a State facility, "liberal establishment."

"Clever oxymoron, Doug. Say – what did you think of my prayer for Father? I call it *Art In Heaven*."

"It'll do. But if you're looking at a career as a writer – poet, novelist, whatever – take my advice and secure at least a part-time paper ass position. All writers – any artist – should expect to be at least a part-time suicide. Are you drunk enough to drive?"

"If I'm old enough to die in Viet Nam I'm drunk enough to drive, OK?"

"OK." He drew back, stood up straight, so all I could see of him – backlit by one lone arc light – was his bulky torso, bringing to mind a fattened grub ready to crawl off into a corner, there to settle into the long gorgeous nightmare of metamorphosis. "Thanks for the ride."

"But," I hiccupped, "you drove."

"No," his voice came down through the roof, "I was riding. The whole time – just along for the ride."

