The following pieces of short fiction are submitted to fulfill the requirements of ID 499, Honors' Thesis:

Jimmy's Father

Forty Years Is a Long Time

A Note for Eddie
Forty Years Is a Long Time

The house at the address on the Christmas card Julie sent me, shortly after moving out of the dorm, was much like the other large, old houses near campus: frame; aluminum siding over rotting clapboard; a chimney on the verge of losing a brick or two; and three to four times the initial allotment of doors and mailboxes. It stood on the corner of McKinley and Calvert, behind a waist-high fortress of plowed snow. Julie had underscored "rear" three times; so, after circling the block, I parked my parents' Ford wagon across the street from the side of the house, as snug against a snow pile and as far from the sliding holiday traffic as I could, and went straight to the narrow pass carved out to the only back door in sight. I stomped my feet in the area shoveled out around the porch steps, and scanned the house before knock-
ing. A curtained attic window looked out over the second story roof, a small addition protruded from the left of the back door, and, to the right, young evergreens had been planted at and around the corner of the house. There were small splotches of yellow, partially melted snow behind the evergreens. I opened the storm door, knocked on the back door, which had a pet entrance crudely installed at its base, and stepped back, bracing myself for Julie's shriek of surprise.

The back door opened, sucking in the storm door, which I had left slightly ajar. A leathery-faced man of about sixty appeared in the portal, and pushed open the storm door. "Well?" he said. He was rather short, wiry, and slightly stooped. He placed his left hand on the door frame. "What can I do for ya?" His nose was like a thick thumb and his eyes were bright, like the snow.

"I'm sorry," I said, turning from his gaze. I looked around, expecting Julie to open a window of the "rear" apartment I had overlooked, or to come running to me from around a side of the house. "I must have the wrong apartment."

The man was staring at me when I looked back at him, his eyes wide and following mine, his lips pursed. His hair, I thought, was a bit long for an old man, stringy, with streaks of defiant brown among rivulets of grey. I looked away.

"Can you tell me which apartment Julie Tiland lives in?" I glanced at his grease-spotted sweatshirt, the ragged cuffs of which halted childishly short of the chisel-thin, knotty wrists. He worked his tongue
behind his lips and watched me.

Taking his left hand from the doorjamb, he pinched his elbow against his side and slowly patted down the air with the weathered hand. "Now let me tellya somethin'," he said, "just so's you'll know." He hung his face out the door, like a narrow, mouthless jack-o-lantern, and tightened his body for the delivery. "I've got this hearin' problem, ya see."

I raised my voice, discreetly. "Do you happen to know--"

"No no," he said, holding his hand up to stop me, showing the top of his head as he wagged his chin. "I can hearya just fine. Just perfect." He peered into my eyes. "What I've got, ya see, is a deaf spot. Yessir. A deaf spot." He nodded sharply. "That means I can hear most every sound but what falls in that there 'dead zone,' they call it. See." He held up a rigid index finger. "You oughta know that first."

Propping open the storm door with his right knee, he hiked up his trousers with his elbows. "Now. You wantta know where Miss Tiland lives? Well. I'll tellya. She lives right back there." He extended his arm past the door and pointed to a detached garage squatting in the far corner of the yard. "We fixed it up a few years back. Yessir. And that's where she lives."

"Thank you," I said, stepping back. "I'm sorry about disturbing you." I turned toward the path to the garage apartment.

"But she ain't there now. No-sir. She ain't there." I stopped, turned, and opened my mouth to speak. "You the fella that's come to
get her?" he asked, raising his chin and squinting at me.

"Yes." I stepped forward again. "Do you happen to know when--"

"You ain't her boyfriend, areya?" He turned his head to look at me askance, still squinting.

"I'm her fiance."

His face jerked back around, his eyes grew big, and his jaw dropped in burlesque astonishment. Immediately, he snapped the jaw shut and blinked, like a dime store turtle. His face lit up. "Aww," he drawled, again looking at me askance, but showing his teeth, this time, in a copious grin of omniscience. He wagged his chin across his chest, then looked up again. "Why you--"

"Do you know if Julie--"

"Get in here." He suddenly waved me into the house. "Come on."

He wagged his chin, blinked his eyes, and grinned, all with the finest of theatrical sense. He waved me in. "You son-of-a-gun. Heh. You son-of-a-gun."

"Thank you, but I'll come back later."

"Come on in here."

"Did Julie happen to say when she'd be back?"

"Come on! I can't hold this door open all blessed day. Heh.

Come on in here. You son-of-a-gun. Heh." He retreated into the gloom of the house, leaving the back door wide open, the storm door ajar.

I glanced at my watch, then at the garage. The student center was the only place I knew of to go, but it was a long walk in the cold. I
entered the house.


At first all I could see was a sunlit parlor through the door directly ahead of me; I saw nothing but green spots in the comparative darkness of the immediate space. "Did Julie happen to tell you when she'd be back?"

"Here. Have a seat. Take off your jacket. You'll warm up in no time."

"That's okay," I shrugged. I was in the kitchen. "I'll stand for a while." From the left, an island breakfast counter and cooktop jutted out into the center of the white-tiled floor. "I've been driv-ing for three hours. So." The appliances and the fan hood over the cooktop were aqua.

"Aw. Here. Sit down." He pulled a stool out from the counter. "You and Miss Tiland gonna get married, areya? Heh. You dirty dog, you." He wagged his head and grinned as he shuffled to the other side of the counter and sat down. "Why," he said. "Why, that's somethin' now, ain't it? Why that's the greatest." On the counter top, he pushed aside an open wad of dull aluminum foil, cradling what appeared to be a lump of cold chicken; then he raised a red metal tumbler to his grin-ning lips. "Heh." A quarter-full beer bottle rested against a paint
dappled screwdriver, among an odd assortment of screws, tacks, and rusty nails.

"Yes, I think so too," I said, and sat down. On the floor next to my stool, on newspaper, sat two blue pet dishes, one half-full of water, the other licked clean, except for a brown crumb or two.

"The name's Evert, Tom Evert. Take off your jacket and stay awhile. Miss Tiland says to me, she says if her young fella comes by, have him wait. That's what she says."

"Pleased to meet you," I said, and told him my name. I took off my jacket and laid it on the stool beside me. Mr. Evert took another drink from the tumbler, then set it down and looked into it, shaking his head. An electric clock whirred quietly away somewhere in the kitchen.

He abruptly looked up at me. "Well. So you and Miss Tiland are gettin' married. If that ain't the--" He beamed and wagged his head. "If that ain't the darndest. Heh." He looked right at me, staring hard. "That's just what two young folks in love ought to do. Yessir." He nodded, not taking his eyes off me. "You known each other awhile, haveya?"

"Yes sir. Since high school. We're looking forward to June."

He shook his head and snorted; then he stared at something over my left shoulder. He glanced at his tumbler. "Now. About this hearin' problem. Don't let it bother you none. I worked the forge at the factory down south of town--the one you probly seen when you was a-comin' in."
He grabbed the edge of the counter with both hands and shot his head and shoulders forward, his face an oval question. "You did come up thirty-two, now?" I nodded. There was a small blackboard by the refrigerator, with "THINGS TO DO" chalked on it, and a list under that. I couldn't make out the list. "Well," he nodded. "I reckon you did. Like I was a-sayin'. I worked the forge there forty years. Yessir. Forty years. That's a long time. Now." He clutched his tumbler with both hands and recounted, in complete and unabridged detail, how the forge, over the years, had beaten a certain set of frequencies out of his auditory reach.

I counted six doors leading out of the kitchen: the back door behind my right shoulder; the living room door across from the back door; a door open into what appeared to be a small utility room to my right; an open bedroom door over my left shoulder, into the addition; a bathroom door to the left of where the counter emerged from the wall, open, disclosing a purple shower curtain and bath mat; and a door to the right of the counter, near Mr. Evert, closed, with a much outdated cloth calendar tacked to it.

"You wantta see the place?" asked Mr. Evert. He watched my eyes. "Come on," he urged, springing from his stool. "I'll showya." He scooted to the utility room.

"Sure," I answered politely. I glanced out the back window as I rose from my stool, and, forgetting what was underfoot, nearly kicked over the water dish.
"This here's one bedroom." He stood in the doorway like a guide or a conductor, sweeping the air with his arm. There was no washer-dryer combination as I had expected. "That there's the bed." He indicated the narrow bed under a rumpled, reddish spread. "Books," he said, pointing to a few paperback westerns on a night table. "TV."

An old, portable black and white model sat on a chair by the window, within arm's reach of the bed. "Got clothes in the closet." He nonchalantly waved his hand over the small wardrobe of trousers and shirts, and stepped back to study me, anxiously awaiting some sort of response.

"Un-huhh."

"Well." He snapped out a nod. He trudged over to the other bedroom and halted just inside the door. "This here's another bedroom."

Three large windows, one in each of the outer walls, opened up the room to the sun and to a panoramic view of snow-covered hedges and rooftops. The snow glistened on the roof of the garage apartment. A double bed, under an azure cover, rested against the far wall, while a tall lamp with a white, cylindrical shade lounged on a night table nearby. Against the right wall stood a dresser and mirror combination, the woodwork of which matched the beige of the large shag carpet. "Sometimes," said Mr. Evert, waving his hand as if brushing aside some triviality at the other end of the room. "Heh." He paused and appeared to study something out the far window for a moment. "Sometimes we..." He gave a nod of finality, not looking at me. "This here's the closet," he said, abruptly turning to the fore wall. He pointed out that there
were clothes in this closet, the same as there had been in the first: slacks, pant suits, blouses, skirts, dresses. I nodded at the clothes and then stepped back into the kitchen. Mr. Evert followed. He looked at me and flashed a grin. "Yessir. And that," he said, pointing to the bathroom, "is the bathroom. Go have a look."

"Yes," I said. "I see."

"Go on. Take a look. Heh."

I poked my head in the door and noticed the purple lid cover, two tubes of toothpaste, the purple hand towels. "Um-hmm," I said. "Yes."

"And now-- Heh." Mr. Evert squinted at me. "I've been saving the good part for last." He whirled around, skirted the counter, and made for the living room. I followed, noticing a brown corduroy jacket hanging on the back of the stool he had vacated. He stopped at the threshold of the living room, turned sideways, the crooked grin still splitting his features, and watched me. I glanced at the door with the calendar. Mr. Evert wrinkled his nose and jabbed a thumb at the closed door. "There ain't nothin' down that basement. Just a bunch of dirty, musty, nasty old stuff." He brushed the thought aside. "Pah!" He then spun around, slapped his hands against his thighs, and grinned into the living room. "Well." He wagged his head. "There she is," he announced, holding out both arms. "Heh."

"Um." Sunlight poured into the room through the windows of the two outer walls, setting fire to patches of white brocade on the sofa and two arm chairs, and flashing off the polished mahogany of the coffee
and end tables.

Took me nearly two full days to get 'er in, but she's in there good." He looked at my shoes and said pensively, "You maybe-- Auh. They're dry by now." He looked into the room. "Go ahead. Walk on 'er. By the time I looked at my shoes, Mr. Evert had stepped into the room and was walking gingerly on a fresh carpet of deep, rich turquoise. "Got a few wrinkles. But no problem there. No problem at all." He steadied himself by placing a hand on the rosewood cabinet of a color television, bent over at the waist, knees slightly angled, and poked at a ripple in the carpet. "What I'll do, ya see, is rent that kickin' machine they got at the tool rental place--the one over on Broadway."

He straightened himself up from the unseemly posture and looked at me with astonishment. "Come on in here!" He waved me in, vigorously. "You ain't gonna hurt it none." I walked as far into the room as the coffee table, glancing around for wrinkles in the carpet.

The phone in the kitchen suddenly rang.

"What?" said Mr. Evert. He looked at me quizzically. I was about to inform him that his telephone was ringing when he said, "I'll bet that's the phone." He set his big eyes on me, then flicked a nod. "Yessir. That's what it is. It's the phone."

"Sounds like it," I concurred.

Mr. Evert scooted after the persistent ringing. I put my hands in my pockets and looked around the room. "Hello." On either side of the sofa was a bolted and padlocked door. "What? Speak up some... I
can hear ya." There were voices behind one of the doors; I made out the
word "suitcase." On each of the end tables sat a large, white-shaded
lamp, the base of which was a porcelain poodle wearing a filigreed lace
collar. "No. I don't know. It's ready, I know that." Between the
front door and the bay window stood a bookshelf cluttered with fine
porcelain knickknacks; the top shelf held a hand-tinted studio photograph
of two blondes—a fair, but not exceptionally attractive young woman,
and a small girl. "I fix 'em up. She rents 'em. No. You haveta talk
to her." The woman and girl wore matching Heidi outfits. "No. She
ain't here. No. I don't know when she'll be back." There was an um-
brella stand next to the bookcase. "Been gone all day. Was gone when
I got up this mornin'... She don't tell me." A light, cashmere
sweater was draped open over the back of one of the arm chairs. "No,
I don't know if she'll be home tomorrow. She don't tell me. What? I
can hear ya." On the carpet, behind the near end table and partly hidden
by the sofa, was a dish-size blotch, a brownish stain. "Alright. You bet."

"Well," said Mr. Evert, grinning at me from the doorway, his hands
on his hips. He looked at the carpet. "She's sure somethin', ain't
she?" He then backed into the kitchen, saying, "Come on in here and
have a seat." I entered the kitchen and walked to where my jacket lay.
Mr. Evert was at the counter by the far wall, pulling something out
of one of the drawers. "You stay here and get comfortable," he said,
closing the drawer. He faced me and shook a small pipe wrench before
his nose. "I got to go see what's leakin', before they leave." He
pulled the worn corduroy jacket off the stool and padded to the black-board. He stuck his nose six inches from the board, pursed his lips, and moved his head up and down. "That's what she says."

I put my jacket on and approached the door to leave. "It's been nice meeting you," I said, my hand on the doorknob.

Mr. Evert stuck an arm in a sleeve of his jacket, his nose still near the board. He then turned around, slipping his other arm in the jacket, and looked at me with sudden, dramatic surprise. "Well," he said. "You got your coat on. Alright." He nodded. "Let's go take a look."

Once outside, Mr. Evert took the lead, and I stepped resignedly in behind. The collar of his jacket was turned up, crimping locks of his hair. We marched briskly around the addition. But when we came to the corner of the house, Mr. Evert stopped, dropped his head, raised the wrench aloft, and said, "Oop!" He turned and started back. I turned around and marched ahead of him to the back porch. "Almost forgot the most important," he said behind me. "The most important—Heh." Once in the small clearing, I let him pass and go up to the door. He opened the storm door and turned to me. "You know that stuff, whattayacallit, that stuff like glue, but it ain't? That stuff like rubber, see? Well." He nodded sharply and turned to open the back door.

"Mr. Evert," I said with a change of heart. He dropped his hand from the back doorknob and faced me, wide-eyed. I began to tell him that I had changed my mind about taking a look at the plumbing with him,
but before I could finish, out through the pet entrance burst a small, slightly overfed white poodle. It bounded down the steps and bounded straight up to me, emitting an uninterrupted series of snappy barks. It then wheeled and bounced, ears flopping, over to Mr. Evert, and greeted him in the same fashion. Mr. Evert asked me to repeat myself. "I think I'll just walk around for a while," I said.

Mr. Evert let go of the storm door handle and came down the steps. "Now if it wasn't for this deaf spot," he said, "I wouldn't have no trouble." He shook his pipe wrench for emphasis. "You talk above it, I'm okay. You talk below it, I'm okay. But you talk right there at that one sound." He pinched his index finger and thumb together before his nose. "You talk right there"--his thin face and torso stiffened with the tension directed at those two fingers--"and I can't hear a thing. Nothin'!"

Around and between our legs, the white poodle padded its manicured paws, yapping at me, yapping at Mr. Evert. "Now I can hear you," said Mr. Evert, "most all the time. It's just this dog here, barkin' in step with your voice. It changes the sound." He looked at me intensely. "There isn't anybody I can't generally hear."

I nodded and looked at the dog.

The poodle rested, panted, then resumed its chorus, barking at me, barking at Mr. Evert. "Yessir," said Mr. Evert. "I can hear most everybody. Some may have to change their voice a little sometimes," he shrugged. "But no problem there. None at all."
The back door opened and a short, trim woman, perhaps a few years younger than Mr. Evert, placed a black leather-booted foot on the porch and propped open the storm door with her hip. She wore grey flannels and a beige turtle-neck sweater. Her white, shoulder-length hair showed traces of blonde at the ends. "Come on, honey," she cooed, removing her black leather gloves. "Hush up and come inside. Come on, baby." The poodle hushed and sat. "Come on, baby. Come in the house." The dog stood and wagged its tail. "Thomas. Will you please pick up Missy and hand her to me. Gently."

Mr. Evert stared at the dog. Then he beamed up at me in amazement. "Heh!" he remarked. "That dog shuts up whenever she's around." He placed his hands on his hips and stared at the dog.

"Thomas!" said the woman, raising her voice. "Please hand Missy to me." Mr. Evert stared at the dog.

"Mr. Evert," I spoke up.

"Thomas!" Mr. Evert stared at the dog.

"I think she wants the dog," I said.

Mr. Evert looked at me, wide-eyed and oval-mouthed. "O-o-h." He looked at the woman. "Why sure!"

"Gently," she said. "You know how skittish she is." Facing Missy, Mr. Evert bent at the waist and clasped his hands around the white fur of the dog's mid-section. "Gently, now." The poodle squirmed and yelped, and Mr. Evert locked his knees. "Gently!" cried the woman, in higher pitch. Mr. Evert quivered, then steadied himself by pushing down on
Missy. His hands slid toward her rump, brutally flattening out her hind legs, like a dressed fryer. "Thomas!!" The poodle screamed and writhed as Mr. Evert scraped her up and passed her to the woman. The storm door banged, the kitchen door slammed, and "Poor baby!" reverberated within.

Mr. Evert squinted pensively across the sunny snow. He turned a frowning, quizzical face to me and placed his knuckles on his hips. "O-o-h." His visage cleared, and he wagged the wrench at me. "I know. Like I was a-sayin'. There's not too much that gets by me. Not too much." He snorted and shook his head. "But!" he said. "Once in a while you get a sound that falls in that dead zone. Yessir." He pinched his thumb and index together. "Right there."

The door of the garage apartment opened unexpectedly, and the ends of two large suitcases appeared on the threshold. "Julie!" I cried, and started away from Mr. Evert. I checked myself and apologized for my rudeness. "I'm sorry," I said, backing toward the garage. "Julie's back and I've got to-- We've-- Well. It was nice meeting you."

"You go on," grinned Mr. Evert. "You go on. Heh."

Julie emerged from the garage, knocking and banging the suitcases against the door, the doorjamb, her knees. I ran up and grabbed the handles of the suitcases.

"Here," said Julie. We kissed. "You take these." She was wearing blue jeans and the peacoat she bought at the army-navy store our senior year. And she had that old wool cap of mine she likes so well
pulled down over her ears, her hair, and almost over her eyes. Her
cheeks were red, like polished apples, and I couldn't wait to have her
sitting beside me in the car. "Go on and take them to the car. I've
got my nightcase yet."

"Okay."

She re-entered the apartment, and I followed the path along to the
alley. "And don't put them on the luggage rack!" she said, stepping
out again.

"Okay," I said, walking backwards with the suitcases so I could
watch her. Mr. Evert was watching us, grinning, and shaking his head.
Julie blew me a kiss from her mitten and ducked inside. I turned,
almost lost my footing, and walked down the alley to the street. Mr.
Evert watched me through the bare shrubbery that lined the alley.

By the time I got the luggage in the car and had closed the tail

gate, Julie was running, charily, across the street, carrying her over
night case and a potted plant with a plastic bag over it. "I almost
forgot my African Violet." I held the door open and she jumped in
front. "It'd starve before I got back." I slid in after her, waving
to Mr. Evert as I closed the door. She sat close to me.

As we pulled up to the stop sign, I spied a break in the traffic
and hurriedly pulled away.
Jimmy's Father

To and fro across the front lawn coursed a small band of sunburned preschoolers, the staccato riff of their shrill squeals rising on the light June breeze and tumbling through the open windows of the brick Colonial—tumbling into the living room, where Cris Gower sat ensconced in the plush cushions of the sofa, her eyes shuttling across the pages of A Summer Affair at Dover Place. She read with an almost fierce absorption, neither slowing nor pausing, until a VW sputtered to a halt at the curb. She then stopped at the end of a paragraph, carefully marked her place with a leaf of tissue paper, and laid the paperback on the magazine-cluttered coffee table. She stretched her arms out and yawned, pushed a husky cat from her lap, stood up, and, ignoring her sandals, crossed the beaten piles of shag carpet to the television, where she lowered the volume. A half-step to the front door, a hand extended through the torn screen to turn the knob, and she was outside. The cat slipped
out ahead of her. On the concrete porch she folded her arms, and then quickly brought a hand up to shield her still dilated pupils from the late-morning sun. She peered over the boiling cluster of lawn sprites to watch a young woman emerge from a Beetle parked in the shade of a sapling.

"Who's the monster? Who's the monster?!" demanded the blond little boy with the Band-Aid on his knee. He bobbed his bare heels on the walk and raised his chin to better scan the little crowd around him. "You are," said a sun-suited ballerina, concluding a faintly clumsy pirouette. She folded her arms with a sniff of resentment. "Yeah," echoed a shirtless Buck Rogers, and then fired, from the hip, a battery-powered laser at the cat bathing himself on the porch. "Yeah!" took up the chorus, gleefully. "You are, Jimmy! You are!" The boy's face darkened and he pursed his lips, the thick lips of a five-year-old. "No I not," he protested, and bent over, indignantly, to test a corner of the Band-Aid. He straightened up again and tossed the blond hair from his eyes with a jerk of his head. "I the captain!" He peremptorily pressed the stem of his digital watch and spoke privately to the red plastic crystal. "Bean me aboard!" he ordered. "Bean me aboard!" His face contracted in a determined scowl of command.

"Get out of the way, Jimmy!" snapped Cris. "Hi, Gloria!" she called, and waved to the short, trim woman, who at that moment ducked her head and shoulders back in the W. "Now you kids move out of the way and let Gloria through." The sun was not kind to Cris; it paled her complexion and called unnecessary attention to the harsh disparity between her tired
brown hair and the bleached streaks that appeared as faded ribbons clinging to her locks. There were pronounced bags under her eyes, and, though she was just thirty, faint hints of jowling cheeks. Her red Bermuda shorts did not flatter her hips. "You heard me. Get out of the way!" She tossed an impatient glance at the children, and then smiled genuinely at Gloria, who was now coming up the walk, peering around a grocery bag to mind her way. "You weren't supposed to be here until twelve."

"I know," said Gloria, with some remorse. Her thick black hair was drawn back primly with a ribbon the same powder blue as her plaid maternity blouse—a garment she had no apparent need for. The heels of her penny loafers came down pertly on the walk. "But," she said, and shifted the bag to her other side, "Steve's got to be—Oops! Who'd I run into?" She stopped and lowered the bag to see. A ponytailed little girl was backing away and rubbing her head with the hand that gripped a water pistol, the cracked handle of which had been mended with surgical tape.

"Jeanie! I told you kids to get out of the way!" Cris frowned irritably and placed her hands on her hips, and the little group fell into awful, suspended animation. Lower lips came out, toes began to wriggle, and fingers variously got themselves busy. A lawn sprinkler tick, tick, ticked across the street.

"Aw, that's alright. It was my fault," said Gloria, hoisting the bag again. She made a quarter turn to slip a palm under Jeanie's blond bang. "Are you alright, honey?" Jeanie nodded diffidently, her eyes wide and amazed, her hand working the pistol across her pate. "That's good," said Gloria. She pulled up the back of the girl's shorts. "How
old are you now?" she asked brightly, and clasped her hands under the bag.

Jeanie suddenly grinned. She quit rubbing. "Threew," she articulated, trying to get the tongue just right. She attempted to show the number with the fingers of the pistol hand and struggled for a moment, but soon surrendered with a noisy sigh of disappointment. She transferred the pistol to her other hand. "Thith many!" she beamed again, and held up two fingers.

"Glory-ah."

"Leave her alone, Jimmy." Cris put a foot on the porch step as if to approach Gloria, but then hesitated, seemingly uncertain whether she should go up or come down. She folded her arms and brought her other foot down to the step.

Gloria nodded at the water pistol. "What's this?" She then glanced at a Styrofoam ice bucket sitting windowed and inverted on the head of a freckle-faced boy. She looked at Jeanie again and ventured, "A ray gun?"

Jeanie looked thoughtfully at the pistol before smiling a cheeky "Unhunh!" Her ponytail jumped with her chesty nods.

"Glory-ah."

"Jimmy! What'd I tell you?"

"My brother gave it to me."

"Is that right, Jimmy?" Gloria now looked at Jimmy, who was tapping her elbow.

"Glory-- Unhunh. It was broke. See my watch?" Jimmy grinned and turned his wrist, rather uncomfortably, for Gloria to see. "Daddy's gonna take me dizzyland," he announced proudly.
"Me too!"

"My! Where'd you get such a beautiful watch?"

"Not you. Only me."

"Jimmy, he is not. Your father is not going to take you to Disneyland. Now you know better. Come on in, Gloria." Cris turned and stepped up on the porch, wagging her head. "Don't let them pester you like that."

"Oh, they're not bothering me," insisted Gloria, moving toward the porch. "Are you, kids?"

Jeanie opened her eyes wide, grinned an incredibly long, tight-lipped grin, and whisked her ponytail from side to side. Jimmy, who had lowered his head and was apparently examining a grape juice stain on his tee-shirt, rolled his eyes up to his brows for a furtive glance at his mother; then resumed his study.

Cris turned to him as she opened the door for Gloria. "Tuck in your shirt," she scolded. "And where are your shoes?" Jimmy ducked his head even lower and mumbled something unintelligible. His lower lip was out. "Well go find them and put them on. Now!" Cris shook her head and followed Gloria into the house, muttering, "Daddy's going to take him to Disneyland indeed."

"Where do you want these?" asked Gloria, standing at the foot of the stairs, the left side of which was banistered and open to the living room, the right walled off from the dining room. "I read as many of them as I could." She smiled. "But you know Steve."

"I don't know. In here." Cris led the way into the dining room. She pointed in the direction of the front door, which had been pushed back
against the wall and was nearly touching the windowframe. "On the floor somewhere," she said, and, folding her arms, walked to the far end of the table.

"Steve's been called in again," said Gloria, bending gingerly over to set the bag on the floor between the door and an armchair shoved against the windows. Her blouse billowed over the bag. "So I can't stay for lunch like I promised." She straightened up and dragged the chair to the table. "Boy!" she complained, "whenever he gets a day off..." She sat down and, discreetly lowering her eyes, watched her hands smooth the blouse over her tummy. She then looked up with a sigh.

The dining room was suffused with sunlight tinted orange by the sheers in the front windows, an orange whose stridency was softened by the clear light streaming in from the front door and from the door open into the kitchen. The greater part of the room was taken up by the chippendale table which spread its wings nearly from the windows to the kitchen wall. It was covered with a padded, plastic tablecloth, the washed-out floral pattern of which was still recognizable around the edges. At each of the two side places a set of colorful, undersize breakfastware—one imprinted with scenes from Mother Goose, the other with Disney cartoon characters—lay in disarray. Corn flakes dried on the bowls and spoons. To Gloria's right were a sideboard crammed with dusty china and a china cabinet inhabited by a multitude of blown-glass figurines. To her left, against the stairwell partition, was a lowboy, its top spread with a large, fringed doily upon which sat a family Bible cradled in a carved wooden bookrest, two cut-glass candlesticks with
fresh, slender white candles, and a silver bell. The sheers played a sluggish game of tag with the screens.

"Don't worry about it," sighed Cris, squeezing between the buffet and the second armchair, which was snugged up to the table. The buffet was a catch-all, its surface a collage of writing pads and chewed pencils, crossword puzzle books, broken crayons, a soiled rag doll, an open box of corn flakes, a pack of flashlight batteries, a damp washrag, two decks of playing cards, pieces of cellophane, a box of Kleenex, and a portable radio blaring "Doo-wop wop doo-wah." A mongrel pup lay curled asleep underneath, a blackish, lint- and hair-fouled beef bone by its snout.

"I've got work to do anyway," she said, cutting off the radio. She then pulled out the chair and plopped down in it, tucking her hands between her thighs and hunching over the table. She pursed her lips. "There are a few things of Jim's yet to get rid of." She stared vacantly at a fly which had lighted on the lip of the Disney bowl and was vigorously washing behind its ears. She squinted maliciously at the fly. "I really ought to burn them."

"Oh!" started Gloria. "There's this thing." She turned in her chair and pulled a pasteboard disc the size of a forty-five recording from between the stacks of harlequin romances in the bag. She straightened up again and showed the disc briefly before tossing it on the table.

"Steve says it's yours. Or rather it's Jim's," she corrected herself. "He's had it for so long he almost forgot about it." She brushed a place free of toast crumbs and sugar granules, and laid one forearm atop the other on the table. "What is it? A round ruler? It says somebody's
lumber yard on it."

Cris eyed the disc curiously as she half rose to reach for it. She only touched it, however--turned the writing toward her--before curling her lip in disdain and sitting down again. "Oh. That thing. That's another one of his grand promises he didn't keep."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, he bought that thing to figure out how much wood or whatever he'd need for the new kitchen."

"Oh."

"Yeah, 'Oh.' That was six years ago."

Gloria looked at her with wide eyes. "Well, Cris, you can't blame that on him. I mean, in all honesty, when Jimmy came along you had trouble making ends meet. You said so yourself." She glanced down at her lap.

"I've got news for you, Gloria," Cris crossed her right leg at the ankle, and clasped the raised foot with both hands. "I haven't told you," she confided, "but that's something else I learned through all this business."

"What's that?"

"He kept a separate bank account."

Gloria's eyes grew very wide.

"And to think that for years he made like we didn't have the money for things." She folded her arms and looked sidelong at the lowboy. "When all the time he was spending our money on that--that--" Her lower lip drew in. "He doesn't care about anybody." Her eyes misted slightly.

"And she's got another thing coming if she thinks he's going to marry her."
She leaned back and folded her arms indignantly, still looking at the
boy.

"Oh Cris, forget it. It's not your fault."

"No. Only that I was a fool. A damn fool." She looked abruptly
at Gloria and said, "Oh, I don't mind being a fool. I can live with that.
God knows I'm not the brightest person in the world." She shuffled her
eyes from side to side. "It's what he's doing to these kids that makes
me so mad."

"To the kids! What's he doing to the kids?"

"Well, it's mostly Jimmy. Jeanie's never known him as a real father."
She reached behind her and yanked a piece of Kleenex from the box. "You
heard what he said about Disneyland." She dabbed the tissue to her nostrils.

"Yes?"

"And that watch. My God," she exclaimed, wadding the tissue in her
fist. "He's going to drive me crazy with that watch!"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, Jim buys him all this stuff and makes him all these promises
he never intends to keep. And what happens? I have to live with him.
That's what happens. He's rotten, Gloria. Rotten. I can't do a thing
with him. One of these days he's liable to--" She dropped her shoulders;
then shrugged them slightly. "I don't know. Do something terrible."

"Well," Gloria offered, holding up her end of the conversation, "how
often does Jim get the kids?"

"Oh, that's not the point." Cris closed her fist tightly around the
wad. "The point is Jimmy's getting more like his father every day. It
scares me. He's getting selfish. He doesn't care about anybody but himself anymore."

"Well, how often does Jim see him?"

"Oh-h." Cris looked away. She seemed to reflect for a moment; then puckered one cheek and continued in a milder tone. "But he's his [father]. Gloria. I can't keep him away from the kids." Her eyes suddenly flashed. "I'm not like he is."

"Well I don't know, but if he's that bad an influence on Jimmy. . . ." Gloria looked down, patted her forearm, and then glanced at the lowboy before looking at Cris again. "Isn't he supposed to see the kids only at certain times?"

"Yeah. Supposedly one weekend a month. I don't know."

"I don't know either, but you've got to do what you think's right for your kids. My gosh. You're not responsible for Jim anymore, you know."

"Yes, I guess you're right." She unraveled the tissue and carefully folded it in half. "It's just that he makes me so mad. God. What a fool I've been." She blew her nose.

"I be back in a minute. You guys wait. Hey! I be back." The screen door slammed. "I gotta tie my shoe," puffed Jimmy, tossing the hair from his eyes. He rounded the lowboy and made for his mother. "Mommy tie my shoe!" He bobbed along on the balls of his feet, his limp arms flopping freely from his jiggling shoulders. "We're playin' space monster and I'm the captain."

"Izzatso?" sniffled his mother. She dropped the damp lump of Kleenex on the buffet and turned to her son. "You need your shoes tied."
"Unhunh."

"Well come here." She pushed the chair back and angled it toward Jimmy. "I don’t know, Gloria. I mean, how stupid could a girl be? Stand still. Put your foot up... Stand still!"

"Oh don’t be so hard on yourself, Cris. You couldn’t possibly have known." She eyed Jimmy as she spoke. He was practicing the splits, one foot against the lowboy, the other on the arm of his mother’s chair. He rolled his head around on his shoulders.

"That’s better. Now hold still." Cris loosened the lace and worked the sock out before tying the shoe. "Now give me the other one."

"Glory-ah," said Jimmy. He rolled his head back to look at her upsidedown. "Look!" He missed the first time, but then succeeded—head thrown back, arms over head—in pressing the stem of his digital watch. The red numbers flashed.

"My!"

"Give me the other one!" Jimmy obliged matter-of-factly. "Geez. It’s like pulling teeth around here." When she finished, she patted his ankle and said, "All done, cowboy."

Jimmy immediately went to Gloria’s side of the empty chair and arranged a row of tiny, detached noses (the end joints of his six middle fingers) along the edge of the table. He did not look at Gloria but past her, at the china cabinet, his jaw hanging in a gaping, pleasureful grin.

"Whatcha doin’?" Gloria quizzed him playfully.

Cris turned her chair back around, saying, somewhat sourly, "He wants you to see something." Jimmy glanced secretively at Gloria, and
then continued to gape at the china cabinet.

"What, Honey?" Gloria clasped her hands under her chin and turned her head to squint at the blown glass animals, ships, and flowers. "You didn't get any new pieces, did you Cris?"

"No. Look closer."

Gloria leaned toward the cabinet. "Oh! There's no glass! I thought you'd cleaned it or something. My goodness." She put her hand through the closed door of the cabinet. "What happened?" She touched a green sea serpent and withdrew her hand.

"Babe Ruth here threw a home run with his sister's shoe."

Jimmy's face glowed.

"Luckily none of the pieces were broken," said Cris, leaning forward and stretching her forearms out on the table. She watched with jaded interest. "Careful. I got most of it, but there's pieces of broken glass in there yet." She shook her head as Gloria lifted her nose to look for any lurking fragments. "And he just laughed when I told him about it," she added, the bitterness jumping into her voice with both feet.

"Who?"

"Jim. He just laughed and said something goddamn trite like "boys will be boys" or something, and left. He didn't even offer to pay for it. I swear." Her nails scraped along the tablecloth as she retracted her arms.

Gloria got out of her chair and stooped in front of the cabinet.

"I know how you must feel, Cris. But you can't expect him to pay for everything that goes wrong with the house, can you?" She plucked a small sliver of glass from under the cabinet.
"But it was his fault!" She tossed her arms in the air in a display of helplessness. "He can never just drop them off. He has to show off by playing catch or something right in the living room. I'll bet she never lets him do that," she grumbled. She stuck out her jaw. "And what's worse, he laughed right in front of Jimmy. Like it was alright. Like it was hunky-dory. Like it was a-okay to break mommy's things." She angrily shook her head. "Why I married him I'll never know."

"Jimmy! Jimmy!" Jeannie stretched and reached high over her head to turn the knob of the screen door. She fought the door open enough to squeeze through, and then chugged to the table. "We want the monsther, Jimmy. We want him."

Gloria looked around, surprised. "Where is he?" She craned her neck and peered over the table—-the six little noses were still lined up on the edge. "Oh. Playing hide and seek, hunh?" She peeked under the table. "I see you," she said in a sing-song voice.

Jeannie tugged at the back of Jimmy's tee-shirt, and pulled him, pouting, from under the table. "I not the monsther," he said, standing up and quickly turning to go outside. I not the monsther!"

"Yeth you are, Jimmy." Jeannie stuck her palms in the small of his back and rolled him along as a stevedore does a barrel.

"No I not!"

Jeannie's head hung below her rigid arms. "You," she rolled a step, "are," she rolled another step, "the monsther!" she blurted, and, overshooting the door, shoved him rather ungraciously into the side of the television.
"Oww!" he protested, and, pride hurt more than elbows or shins, turned on his sister with vengeance. One fist shot in the air, the other went to his bared teeth.

"Jimmy!" cried Cris, spying the impending violence through the mirror of Gloria's face. She sprang to her feet and scuttled, shoulders back, to a commanding position by the lowboy.

Jeanie, having promptly assumed the defensive, stood with her back to her brother, her head pulled into a desperately imagined shell, and her forearms flung on top; her eyelids fluttered furiously. Jimmy's fist circled in the air.

Cris placed a hand on her hip and wagged the index finger of the other at the children. "Now stop that!"

Jimmy's raised fist quickly joined his other at his protruding lower lip, and Jeanie's eyelids batted to a standstill. Jeanie looked at her mother between blinks.

"If you two can't play together nice, I'll send you both up for your naps. You hear me?"

Jeanie burst into an innocent smile. "But we were play-ing." She bounced her shoulders and showed her tacky little palms.

"She hit me."

"Did you hit him?"

"No-o-o, Jimmy."

"Yes," Jimmy said, brazenly.

"Now, Jimmy!" Gloria said in a tone of playful admonition. "She didn't hit you. She was just playing."
"That's what I thought. I've had about as much out of you, mister, as I can take. Now if you don't get out there and play nice, I'll send you up to bed. And I mean it. Now go on, both of you."

The children walked sheepishly out the door while Cris held it open. "The monster!" shrieked a little girl. "The monster! The monster!" cried the rest, and scattered in spasms of delight across the lawn.

"No I not!" Jimmy hollered, and gave his sister a shove as they stepped off the porch.

"Jimmy!" Cris yelled. "Now I mean it!" She watched him a moment, and then let the door bang shut. She returned to the dining room, saying, "I can't stand it, Gloria. I can't stand it!" Her arms went up as if by themselves, and her fingers briefly curled in rage before her arms dropped to her sides. "It's bad enough he's ruined my life, but does he have to ruin theirs too?" She caught a glimpse of Gloria and quickly added, as she returned to her chair, "He never lied like that until he saw his father do it. And he was never that vicious, either." She humphed down in the chair.

Gloria was standing in front of the china cabinet, looking at the two or three fragments of glass in her hand. "Trash can handy?" She looked at Cris.

"Oh just leave it with that thing," she nodded at the disc. "I'll take care of them later." She watched Gloria carefully place the slivers on the tablecloth. "I'm worried, Gloria." Her eyes lost their focus. "I'm really worried. I'm afraid something terrible's going to happen, the way he acts."
"Well, why don't you do something, then." She pushed the chair against the windows, faced Cris again, and folded her arms. "Your mother still want you to move out west with her?"

"Leaving already?" Cris pushed her chair back.

"Yeah. Steve's got to have the car."

"Oh. That's right." She pushed herself from the chair and folded her arms. "Yeah. You're right, I suppose. I really ought to get away from here. I ought to get the kids away from that man before it's too late."

"Well, if you want my--"

"What was that!" Cris suddenly paled and moved forward.

"Sounded like one of the kids," said Gloria, taking her cue from Cris. She pulled aside one of the sheers and peeped out. "I don't see anybody." Her nose touched the screen. "It sure got quiet all of a sudden."

Cris was moving rapidly toward the door, but before she could get to it, it was flung open violently. Jimmy ran headlong into the living room, his eyes pinched nearly shut and his mouth seemingly locked open. He threw himself on the sofa and buried his face in one of the bolsters. His chest heaved convulsively. Cris went directly to him and tried to pry his shoulder from the couch. "What's the matter!?" she demanded. Jimmy resisted his mother's attempts to turn him over. "Why are you crying?"

"I'll see you later, Cris."

Cris let go of Jimmy. "You tell me or you'll go up for your nap," she said, and then turned and walked to the door. "I'm sorry you couldn't stay."

Gloria reached her hand through the screen. "So am I," she said,
and opened the door. "I'll give you a call later on."

"Okay."

Gloria almost bumped into Jeanie when she turned to leave the porch. "Oops! Almost got you again." Jeanie was concentrating on her last, unsteady step onto the porch, and was clutching a small object to her chest with both hands. Gloria patted her head as she descended the steps. "Be a good girl. See you all later!" She took off down the walk.

"Eve, Gloria," said Cris, and then turned to Jeanie. "What happened, Jeanie. Why is Jimmy crying? Why did everybody go home?"

"Jimmy hit Brian," she said, very gravely.

"I might have known," sighed Cris, mournfully. "So why's he crying?"

Jeanie drew in her lower lip and took her hands from her chest. "Here," she said with awe, and raised the cup of her hands to her mother. "Brian got mad and brokt it."

Cris took the watch and the loose, torn strap from Jeanie. "That's okay. Mommy'll take care of it now. Go on and play."

Jeanie poked her head around her mother and peered into the living room. "Jimmy!" she stage-whispered. Jimmy sobbed loudly.

"Go on, I said! Go play!" Cris shooed her daughter from the porch, and then let the screen door close against her back. "It can be fixed," she told the sofa. She saw that the crystal was cracked and then added, "And if it can't, I'll get you another one. It's a cheap thing anyway." Immediately the sobbing droned into a ghastly wail. Cris shuddered and crossed her arms up under her breasts. Her face grew stern. "Now you stop that or I'll send you up to bed. I mean it!" She stood before
the stairs, experimenting with the watch and the severed strap. Then she suddenly added, "It's not the end of the world!" She laid the watch on the television and turned and marched haughtily off to the dining room, late, by all appearances, for an appointment in the kitchen.

But at the kitchen door she stopped suddenly, as if hung at the end of a tether. Her eyes slinked from side to side, and she tightened the square-knot of her arms. She stood for a moment and stared indignantly, blindly ahead. The green muslin curtains rolled and billowed lazily over a small, crescent mound of peatmoss on the sill, above a pile of crusty pots and utensils in and about the sink; and a dust mouse nibbled at a bit of hard, stale cheese beside the overflowing trash can. Heavy, somnolent grief throbbed in the living room, and Cris turned back around, unhearing.

She gazed across the dining room with the haughty frown faintly molded, though now forgotten, on her features. The sleeping pup twitched and whimpered in its sleep.

When her eyes focused and she found herself staring at the pasteboard disc, she averted her gaze and went quickly to the radio. But she did not turn it on. Her fingers went out to the knob, but stopped and closed in a fist. The sobbing grew fainter, and the ticking of the lawn sprinkler could be heard above it. Suddenly Cris hurled her gaze back at the disc and pressed her lips together so tightly that they all but disappeared. Then she marched purposefully to the window end of the table, snatched up the disc, and started for the kitchen. But she took only two steps before stopping. She turned abruptly and squatted in front of the lowboy. The candlesticks wobbled slightly as she edged out the bottom drawer, buried
the disc under a stack of bright, white linen, and closed the drawer again. She stood up. A cry came from the living room, a sudden flare from a dying fire, and her breath began to come heavily. She clenched her teeth. She then started around the corner, shoulders back, turned, and flung herself upstairs.
A Note for Eddie

Elaine took no notice of the city buildings looming up through the Sunday morning twilight like tall ghosts rising from the pavement, but strode briskly down the sidewalk, eyes ahead, fists pressing into the pocket seams of her wool overcoat. She could feel at once, when she turned onto West Madison, the overpowering height of the Hamilton hotel, but did not, as was her wont when a little girl (some eons ago, she admitted, being now in her mid-twenties and well over the hill), indulge the urge to stop flatfooted on the pavement, head rolling back, mouth agape, and eyes climbing, human-fly-like, the innumerable stories to the cosmos. Instead, pinning her shoulders to her ears and shivering in protest against the first gusts of autumn, she walked hurriedly on to the south entrance, where, under the marquee, she paused to pull her left fist from her pocket and briefly examine a small scrap of paper. She then pushed her way through the heavy glass doors of the hotel.
The Hamilton's main lobby greeted her indifferently. It lay cathedral silent and virtually empty--save for a desk clerk yawning over his fresh morning paper and a vague, drifting soul or two more. Skipping, striding, hopping, Elaine all but ran to the elevators, her features reddening with the first obstreperous echoes of her house-slippers scratching across the cold marble. (She had dressed hastily that morning, grabbing at whatever straws lay draped over her chair or in a crumpled heap near her dresser: a floppy orange sweater; new, very stiff blue jeans; and a lime-green overcoat, with enough yellow in it, she had once felt, to highlight the blonde in her hair.) Instinctively, though she felt no reproving stares, she pinched her coat lapels together with her right hand and scooted into an empty elevator. She glanced at the scrap of paper, pushed button "25" with her palm, and wilted against the handrail with a deep sigh.

"Up! Going up!" jumped sideways through the narrowing space between the doors. Gazelle-like, Elaine leaped at the "OPEN DOOR" button. She was promptly obeyed. "Thank you. I really wasn't thinking," said a robust gentleman with strong, clean features. He stepped into the car and bent over to set down a briefcase and an overnight bag, motioning with his free hand as if to doff his hat. He straightened up with a hearty "whew," and reached in front of Elaine to press "36." He smelled of newsprint and crisp morning air, and he said, "Excuse me." He stepped back and began to rub his reddened hands, making no effort to conceal his shortness of breath. He shook his head as the doors glided together. "I'm really sorry. There were at least two others I could
have taken," he panted, laughingly. He seemed charged, near bursting with energy. He looked at Elaine and blew into his cupped hands. "I'm no better than one of Pavlov's dogs. Whenever I see an elevator on the move, I salivate, so to speak, and bolt for it." He shook his head again. "It's just one of those nasty habits, I suppose." He chuckled and gazed at Elaine.

Elaine smiled politely and, after a furtive, encompassing glance at her elevator companion, pushed her fists into her pockets and stared, quite self-consciously, at the two shameless pink cottontails staring back at her from the toes of her slippers. The man watched her a moment, then cleared his throat and directed his gaze to the dot of light leapfrogging above the doors. He unbuttoned his overcoat and assumed an attitude of concentration, his smile slowly fading. Elaine stared at the floor and began to nibble at her lower lip. She adjusted her cerebral sunglasses and perused the synthetic stone, scanning an area which fanned from the right wall, to the front wall, and halted abruptly at an imaginary, yet nonetheless peremptory wall running from the bottom right corner of the doors to the outside edge of her left cottontail. She was alone in an elevator with a strange man, a man easily twice her size. The man coughed and cleared his throat, his overcoat rustling as he folded his arms. Elaine looked at the control panel, at "OPEN DOOR," and deliberately ignored a ridiculous, unfounded, burgeoning fear. She bit fiercely into her lip, and, forcibly lowering her shoulders (the man coughed again, an empty, superfluous cough), bravely glanced at the indicator light before resuming her inspection of the floor. It
was crazy and she knew it, but she couldn't help feeling as if strange, warm mental hands were on her, touching her cheeks, her throat, causing her heart to beat unbearably loud. She swallowed and shook her tresses free of her collar as if to toss off the idiotic notion. The man shifted his hands to his coat pockets, emitting an only slightly perceptible wet noise of smacking lips, and Elaine began to pray that her heart wouldn't start knocking at the trap door of her throat.

Number twenty-five lit up; the bell sounded. Elaine bolted through the just open doors and darted left down the carpeted hall, nearly running, both hands in her pockets. She slowed when she heard the doors close on the man's cough, and, feeling no other presence in the hall, cast a reaffirming glance over her shoulder. She then stopped and snorted uneasily, disdainfully at all childish notions, and watched her left hand produce the scrap of paper. She gazed blankly at the shakily penciled message, quietly forgetting her refractory pulse. Then she gasped, jerked her head up, and looked at the room number on the nearest door. She looked at the paper. She moved to the next door and looked at the number. She glanced at the door across the way, whirled around, and strode back to the short end of the hall. Skipping quickly past the elevators, she halted in the last square inches of carpet that belonged to the hall proper. She bowed slightly forward, as if making a last, perfunctory check, and looked around the corner, left and right, at each of the two doors in the brief, foyer-like crossway. She glanced at the paper—shuddering, reflexively, at the electric throb of the one elevator in use—and then looked at the door on the left. She approached the left door.
The door opened on the second rap, and a tall, unshaven young man in patched blue jeans and an army field jacket stood squarely in the doorway, gazing at her. His right hand was on the door; his left in a jacket pocket. He appeared to be in his mid- to late-twenties, with a countenance that suggested not so much a recent lack of sustenance as an inveterate unconcern for the baser needs. His jaw was set firmly.

"Oh, Eddie!" breathed Elaine, as if easing into a hot bath. "It's been so long, Eddie!" She slipped both arms around his jacket and attached herself to him with all her might, nestling her head under his chin. "Too long. I've been so worried. Why didn't you write?" she moaned, raising her heels off the floor to kiss him. She quivered warmly under the kiss, sighing blissfully. She reached her hands up to cradle his face, but suddenly, upon touching his cheeks, exclaimed, "My God you're cold!" and pushed away from him. "Your jacket's cold." She looked at his jacket, his eyes, and then around his shoulder. "Eddie, this whole room's cold!" She looked up at him in amazement. "Haven't you got any heat?" She rushed past him, into the room. "What on earth!" The window's open! Eddie, why on earth have you got the window open?!" She rushed between the nicely made single beds and grabbed at the window to pull it down.

"I've been thinking," said Eddie, closing the door, blindly. The rims of his eyes were slightly puffed, and his pupils, like two unfed stokeholes, traced Elaine's every bounce and gesture. A tiny, blood-red hand reached up from the inside corner of his right eye. Letting his hand slip from the doorknob, he moved from the narrow passage formed by
the bathroom on his right and the wall on his left, into the room, still watching Elaine. He wore no shoes or socks.

"You won't be able to--think very-- unh--well if you catch--pneumonia," grunted Elaine. "This thing's stuck. Eddie, will you-- I got it."

The window screeched and shuddered and came down begrudgingly. "Why'd you come up so early?" she asked in a voice now vibrant, almost giddy. "It's not even daylight." She raised herself on tiptoe and jammed the window into the sill. Newspaper leaves and disembodied hamburger wrappers skittered about the floor of a dim, sterile canyon. She then wiped her hands together clumsily, unwilling to let go of the paper. "You didn't thumb up, did you?" She gave the window frame another quick, firm press.

"Eddie?" She turned to approach and embrace him, but stopped short when she saw him sitting in a chair across the room, by the bureau.

He sat with a bare foot flat on the seat cushion, one hand cupped over the raised knee, the other tapping a cigarette lighter on the chair arm. He looked down at the floor as Elaine turned to face him. "No."

He slowly tapped the lighter, allowing his thumb and index finger to slip down the sides of the chrome case. "I've been here." He spoke quietly, firmly, but with a wisp of something, supplication perhaps, skimming his voice. He looked at the lighter and then at Elaine. His gaze rode her brows, slid down her cheekbones, and touched her chin, her earlobes. He then looked at the floor.

"You've been here?" The room was chilly, and Elaine's hands, which had begun to open and reach outward when she turned from the window, now hung before her, squeezing warmth into each other. She was oddly puzzled,
but kept smiling. "When'd you get in?"

"Last night."

"Last night! Why didn't you call me?" She threw a hurt glance at an ashtray and pack of cigarettes on the bureau.

"I was thinking," he said, looking at the floor.

"But we could've--" She lowered her eyes, her smile slowly fading, and put her hands in her coat pockets. "--had more time," she murmured, and sank down on the bed to her right. She sat on the edge, curling in her lower lip, waiting for an explanation. The lighter tapped quietly, coolly. She pursed her lips and glanced about the carpet a few silent moments. The lighter tapped. She shrugged. A smile then came upon her. She tried to squeeze it back from her lips, but succeeded only, however, in forcing it upward, out through her eyes. "It's been a long time, Eddie," she said looking up, her eyes smiling. She withdrew her right hand from its pocket and flipped her hair free of her collar.

"Yes, it has." He dumped his foot on the floor and stood up, glancing at her as he rose.

Elaine's breath grew suddenly warmer, and she looked down. She rested her pocketed left fist in her lap, and watched her right hand smooth out a place beside her on the spread.

Eddie dropped the lighter in a jacket pocket and moved to the bureau. He slid a cigarette from the pack and stood gazing at it, his back to Elaine.

Hearing him press against the drawers, Elaine rode her gaze across the carpet to the bureau, where she looked up. The room was flat, lifeless under the wan glare of the ceiling fixture. It was still cold. She
watched him in the mirror as he stared at the cigarette, and saw, as if for the first time, his pale complexion and disheveled hair. "Eddie! What's wrong? Are you alright? I mean, do you feel very well? You look like you've got something. The flu or something." She glanced at his slowly heaving shoulders. "You shouldn't have had the window open with--"

"I'm fine," he muttered, cutting her short.

Her gaze fell to the carpet as if it had been tripped, and she drew her coat lapels together. The room was taking an awfully long time to warm up. He was thinking—he said he had been thinking. She brightened again, and looked at the mirror. "You said you had something to tell me. Something important. About—" She lowered her lids, demurely. "About us."

He glanced at her reflection, and then dropped the cigarette into the clean ashtray. His head fell, pulling his gaze down with it, and he pressed the knuckles of both fists down on the bureau. He exhaled and faintly bobbed his head.

"Something is wrong, Eddie," said Elaine, craning her neck just slightly. "What is it? You're acting just like you did before that Fort Benning business. Tell me. What's bothering you?"

He purged his lungs and shook his head. "Nothing," he said. "Anymore."

Elaine now saw; and she felt herself slide—drop—into a static, tepid trough of realization. She pressed her eyelids shut and relaxed her shoulders. Then she opened her eyes again to study Eddie's lowered face in the mirror. "You didn't lose your job again, did you?"

Eddie shook his head and swallowed. "That doesn't matter, Elaine."
"Did you lose your job again, Eddie?" Elaine pursed her lips and looked down. She patted her lapels, as if instructing them to stay together, and began to brush lint from the skirts of her coat.

Eddie glanced at Elaine's reflection. His jaw was set. "That doesn't matter."

"You lost your job, didn't you," she said looking up, resolute, her head lightly askew.

"Elaine." Eddie brusquely pushed away from the bureau and returned to the chair. He fell into it heavily and began to rub his eyes with the heels of his hands. "What matters--"

"Eddie."

"Alright, Elaine." That something in his voice was now nearly an impediment, a palpable tremor like the tension in a fisherman's taut line. He dropped his hands to the chair arms; then he pulled out the lighter and examined it. "I did lose my job. But that whole business," he said as though he were exhausted, "is so unbelievably trivial anymore that--"

"Trivial! Eddie," Elaine nearly whined, her hands curling beseechingly into fists. "For almost three years, Eddie, I've waited here for you to find a job you like--" She checked herself and looked down at the bed. She picked at the spread and then began to run her thumbnail along one of the ribs. "A job that makes sense to you." She watched her nail and waited, a touch uneasily, for a response. Eddie said nothing. Feeling a quiet, yet active, almost searching gaze on her, she relieved the thumb with a finger and cautiously looked up.

Eddie turned the lighter over in his hand and watched her, his eye-
brows touching, lightly pushing each other upward. He swallowed, and
looked at the lighter. His jaw was set.

Elaine looked at the lighter and then at her coat, her eyes skirting,
in quick detour, the other bed. The middle button of her coat negligently
trailed a rather long, green thread. "When'd you start smoking?" she
asked, instinctively changing the subject. She wound the thread under
the button, safely out of sight.

"Huh?" Eddie glanced at her face, her hand.

"When'd you start smoking?"

"A couple of weeks ago," he said, shrugging. "After I got fired."

"Two weeks ago?" Elaine rectified an incipient slouch. "Why on
earth didn't you come home then?" she pleaded. "Why didn't you call
me? Why didn't you write, Eddie? You know I don't care about you losing
your job. You should've at least let me know."

Eddie impetuously leapt from the chair and stepped to the bureau.
"I had to think," he said, running a hand through his hair. He turned
his back to Elaine, and appeared to absorb himself in the lighter.

Elaine opened her mouth to speak, but acquiesced to the drab olive
silence of Eddie's back. She allowed her mouth to close again. She then
clutched at her coat lapels and searched the floor for a heat register.
Spying one to the left of the chair, she almost succumbed to the impulse
to go over to it, but slumped back resignedly, allowing the urge to slough
off and act on its own. "That heater must not be working," she said
blandly, as if watching herself place a hand over it. She flicked a glance
at Eddie, and then turned her head away, toward the window. The buildings
across the street had grown quite visible, though still shrouded in the
grey light of dawn.

Eddie started to make a sound—Elaine's face jerked back around—but quit, and cleared his throat. He rolled his head back, and blew a
long, shuddering breath at the ceiling. He lowered his head again,
closing his eyes, and pressed his fists down on the bureau.

Elaine lowered her eyes and fashioned a patient smile on her attenuate
lips. "Why don't you go see your father?" she asked tenderly, looking up.
"I'm sure he'll take you back at the plant." She smoothed the spread.
"He certainly knows by now that you weren't dishonored or anything. That
the Army just didn't think you fit anymore. Just because you climbed
that silly water tower to think." She pulled a lock of hair back from
her right eye. "Have you thought of that? Your father taking you back,
I mean." She sat expectantly, fighting off the lingering chill.

"No." Eddie turned and faced her. "He's dead, anyway." He clumsily
placed his hands behind him, on the bureau, arms to either side like guy
wires. He exhaled convulsively.

"Eddie, what are you saying? Your father—"

"He might as well be. He's a walking corpse." He watched without
interest his right foot cross his left. "If you don't have—life, you're
dead." His voice dropped somewhat at the end, as if he suddenly remembered
a light sleeper in the next room.

"Well. I'll ask my father again. Or my mother. Sometimes there's—"

"No. No, Elaine." He glanced at her eyes and then looked out the
window, shaking his head. He swallowed. He opened his mouth, sighed,
and then stared blankly at the floor.

Elaine briefly considered suggesting that he return to school and get his degree, but knew immediately his response, and so let the notion evaporate. She wagged her head very slightly and then allowed it to sag, her eyes drifting to the space between the beds. She felt strangely alone. Her right hand again found its way to her lapels and hung on. Her shoulders were heavy—her whole body was heavy, and she felt herself sinking deeper into the mattress. She had a peculiar, fleeting desire to be home in bed with the covers pulled securely over her head, and she closed her eyes. She heard a clock beating, echoing, dully somewhere, and she half imagined herself looking for it—before realizing it was her heart. Eddie moved toward the door, and a sound like the tumbling of a lock tripped her eyelids; they opened and embraced a gloom between the beds. The room was darker.

"Sun's up," said Eddie, his hand falling from the light switch. He worked his hands into his jeans' pockets and shuffled back to the chair, where he stood looking at it for a moment before pulling his hands out again and sitting down. He leaned back and pressed his palms against his face.

Elaine heard him fidget in the chair, she heard him breathe, but she could not, for all her intent, make herself look at him. Her eyes were now dodging about between the beds, as if avoiding the hounds. She was suddenly, unreasonably frightened. And before she was aware of speaking, she said, "It's been four years, Eddie, counting the Army and the five months before. Four years. We've got our whole lives ahead of
Her voice sounded far away, and there was an odd, nasal quality to it; it was shaky. Eddie abruptly quit fidgeting, breathing even, and Elaine became more frightened. She was frightened of his silence, frightened of her voice, frightened of whatever it was made her speak again: "You're the most important person in my life, Eddie. You know that."
Her throat began to close around her words. She choked, "My life is nothing without you." She listened to her words as if they had been spoken by someone else, and she trembled. Then precipitately, without her consent, without her knowledge even, her eyes were drawn up to Eddie's, which were looking straight and steadily back. Her own were sparkling with moisture.

Eddie's eyes flickered. He was leaning forward, elbows on knees. "Right!" he said. "Right!" He closed and opened the lighter with his thumb. His face was flushed; his eyes flashed. He worked the lighter. "That's right! We're made for each other. We fit." His eyes were wide, electric.

Elaine's mouth fell open a little, and she moved her head slowly from side to side. Her forehead and brows wrinkled into a funnel over her nose, and she whispered, "Yes." The clock grew faster, louder. Eddie jumped from the chair, and she gasped. The clock pounded as she watched him move to the bureau.

"And that's all that's important, isn't it?" He cupped his hands around the lighter and looked intently at Elaine's reflection.

A sob and a laugh collided on the way out her throat, and she coughed. "Yes!" She beamed and nodded. Her feet drew in, squarely under her weight.
She suddenly felt light—ready to leap, to fly.

Eddie turned and faced her. His jaw was set, his eyes aflame. "More important than anything else—than everything else?"

"You know it is, Eddie," she replied, her face anxiously taut, her eyes wildly agreeing with his. She bounced lightly, once, on the bed as she began to undo her coat buttons.

"I know," he said. "I know." He was breathing heavily now, like a locomotive steaming into motion. He gazed hard into Elaine's eyes. "So what we have to do is—quit playing charades. No more you, and no more me. It'll be us. Always. We'll quit playing at life and be life. It's so simple. So simple. Don't you see?"

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" She sobbed and laughed and sprang to her feet, ignoring, or perhaps spurred by, a sudden, sharp fear. She threw her arms around Eddie and held on. "My God, yes, Eddie!" She pressed her cheek against his chest, her face to the bureau, her eyes shut in thankfulness. "It doesn't matter anymore. It doesn't. Silly jobs, silly people, silly world." She sniffled and gagged and laughed. "Just us, Eddie. Just us."

Eddie placed his hands on Elaine's shoulders and held her out to look at her. He was breathing deeply and rhythmically, and he looked forcefully into her eyes. "This is serious, Elaine. It's more than just talking about it. We're going to do it. You and me. We're going to be one. In essence. We're going to put everything, all this suffering, behind us."

Elaine daintily ran the knuckles of her forefinger under her nose, and nodded soberly. "Yes," she said solemnly, mirroring Eddie's tone.
Eddie broke into a smile. "You know," he said shaking his head, his eyes filled with the wonder of it all, "it's not—not even scary like it should be." His fingers clutched firmly at Elaine's shoulders. His eyes were glazed, as if focused on something right in front of her. "Not with us being—together like this." Then his eyes met hers, and he swallowed. His face grew stern, and he hurled steely shafts into the caverns of her pupils. "It's the truth that everybody's afraid of. It's like the man said, we have to lose to have. And that's why there's so few. Do you—see what I mean?"

"I do," she murmured gravely, from deep in her throat. She let her body incline toward Eddie, and he let her fall into him. "I do," she repeated. She closed her eyes and laid her cheek against his chest. She then opened her eyes and watched her mirror image say, "I do."

She watched her reflection dreamily, gradually taking in the red, swollen eyes, the wet cheeks, the dull lips, the mussed hair. She then sharply awoke and gasped, "My God I'm a mess!" She pushed away from Eddie, touching her fingertips to her cheeks, her hair. "How can you stand me?"

She gawked at him in quasi-horror, her fingers now over her open mouth. "Wait right here!" She patted his chest and flew to the bathroom.

She flicked on the light and closed the door behind her, beaming the while through her tears, and chiding the mirror for being so frightful. She turned on the taps and unwrapped the tiny bar of soap. He wanted her to be with him forever. She was so happy. She washed off the wet streaks and dabbed cold water at her eyes. She wondered what they would do, where they would go, and patted dry her face with one
of the immaculate towels. She folded the towel and replaced it, and then touched at her hair, making a face of disdain and muttering "rats' nest." Remembering her purse, she reached for the doorknob—the shuddering and screeching sound of beds being drawn together came from the other room, and she blushed. She cast a bashful glance at the mirror and smiled to herself. "We're going to be one. Then, remembering, correctly now, that she had not brought her purse, she approached the washstand again, reaching in her coat pockets for a comb or something. She found only her car keys and the now crumpled piece of paper. She replaced them and tried her jeans' pockets—no comb there, either. He wanted her to be with him forever. She frowned at the mirror, happily, and began as best as she could to straighten things out. Her fingers were skittish, impatient.

A faint flourish of car horns greeted her when she reopened the door, and a bright square of mandarin sunlight grinned crookedly from the wall, bureau, and chair. The room was cold. "My God, Eddie!" she blurted, rounding the corner. "What on earth! Eddie, what are you doing?"

The curtains jiggled fancifully in the slight but stiff breeze. The window was thrust wide open, and Eddie sat on the sill, his hands clutching the inside of the raised sash, his legs dangling, dangerously, out of view. His head was completely outside, tilted upward on the end of his straining neck. He appeared not to have heard her.

She rushed between the beds, buttoning her coat, and breathlessly demanded to know what he thought he was doing. "We're both going to catch pneumonia!"

Eddie ducked his head back inside and looked hard into Elaine's eyes.
He edged to his left on the sill, and then held out his right hand to her. His jaw was set; his eyebrows were touching.

Elaine emitted a little, nervous laugh, and glanced out the window to the street far below. "No, Eddie. I don't think so. Why don't you come back in and close that window? I'm getting cold." Immediately she was sorry she had spoken. Eddie's face paled, and his lips parted. He stared at her incredulously, as if he had all along mistaken her for someone else, and only now realized his mistake. His hand lowered, and he started to draw it in. Elaine panicked, and grabbed for his hand with both of hers. They would have to get used to each other's quirks, support each other, help each other. She released his hand to wrap the skirts of her coat tightly around her legs, and then proceeded to climb into the window. Eddie burst into a radiant smile as she worked her way into place, the strength again evident in his eyes. He helped her tenderly. "It's a long way down, isn't it?" she said with a shaky little laugh, looking past her cotton-tails at the sun-soaked street with its sparse, drowsy traffic. Her feet tingled uncomfortably. But she was glad—it really wasn't as scary as she had thought it would be, not with both of them there. Eddie was right. She sat with her right arm straining against the wall, the fingers of her left hand clawing at the sill. She shivered and looked smilingly at Eddie.

He was looking back, his face gloriously illuminated by the sun. His jaw was set, and his chest heaved. "You are with me?"

"Yes," she said quickly, looking softly into his eyes, trying to evince total sincerity, trying to undo what damage she may have just
caused. She felt buoyed by his gaze, a cork bobbing listlessly on tropical seas. Eddie blazed into a strong, confident smile, and her gaze lowered. She closed her eyes tightly and bit her lip to hold in the sudden swelling of joy. They would manage as her parents had not, as his had not—as nobody she knew had. Let everything else go. Lose to have. He was right. The breeze abated and the warm sun loved her right cheek. She turned her face fully to the new sun, and basked her closed lids in the radiant energy of life. All around her, now, was warmth.

"Then we—" He swallowed. "Then we—do it."

She whispered, "Yes," and nodded joyfully, tearfully into the warm, golden light.

"Okay." Eddie sat trembling, shaking with the power of conviction.

What they had was worth more than any high salary, any fine clothes, any nice house—any thing. She could feel how well Eddie knew it would be difficult, and she resolved to help him, to follow him. A house would be nice—but they would not worry about that yet, as long as they were together. Eddie made a scraping noise as if he were shifting positions. And then it was cold.

Elaine was nodding, and the sun was bright on her face, but she was suddenly and unbearably cold. "Eddie?" She turned around sharply. Eddie was gone. Her heart leapt into her throat and she faltered, dangerously, but caught herself; she dug her fingernails into the wall and sill.

"Eddie!" she cried, feeling a little foolish about her uneasiness. She ducked her head back inside. Eddie was not in the room. "Eddie, are you in the bathroom?" Her eyes frantically searched the room. "Eddie?"
She considered looking under the beds. "Eddie answer me. It's not funny!"

Had she heard the door close? Did Eddie need something? A coke? Breakfast? Cigarettes--he smoked now. No. "Eddie!" she screamed at the mirror. Her voice echoed through the room. Did he say something? She listened. There were voices, many voices far away, down, below her feet. Tires squealed. "Okay, Eddie," she said in a trembling voice, "you can come out now. It's not funny anymore." Shadows came, taking the bright square from the bureau and wall. She began to shiver. A car horn blested. There was noise, much confused noise somewhere. She thrust her head back out the window to tell them to please, for God's sake, shut up--but she froze. Her voice would not work; she could not look down. Then she screamed. Her voice was not working and her lips were stuck together, but she was screaming. She screamed and screamed until her head would burst. Now she could not hear what was being said to her, what was being said to her in a very quiet voice deep inside. She screamed louder. Her eyes locked open and she stared vacantly at the building across the way. It was cold. She was screaming.

The man who talked consolingly to Elaine from a window above and to her right was not one of the three who entered the room. Two of them wore overcoats. The third wore a bright three-piece suit and carried an over-stuffed key ring; he followed the others, his mustache twitching nervously. The men in overcoats approached the window. They walked slowly and carefully, talking soft, friendly talk. And then they gently helped Elaine back into the room, still talking--friendly talk.

"Frank," said the tall one, "I'm going to get her out of here before
the press gets here." Elaine's hands had crawled into her coat pockets; she stared at nothing.

Frank nodded and let go of his side of Elaine. He turned to the man with the mustache and said, "It's alright. It's nobody's fault. It may have even been an accident. We'll take care of it."

The tall man turned Elaine to lead her away, but stopped before taking a step. "What's this?" He looked down at the undisturbed bed. Elaine stared at the mirror, at nothing. He hiked up his coat tail, shoved his free hand in his hip pocket, and brought it out again with a handkerchief. He shook the handkerchief open and draped it over the small chrome object lying near the pillow. Then he picked up Eddie's lighter in the handkerchief, put the little bundle in his coat pocket, and led Elaine out the door.

In the elevator, the tall man opened the little door on the control panel with a key the nervous man had given him. The doors closed, and the little light began to jump backwards. His left hand held Elaine's right arm, lightly, just under the armpit. His right hand found its way to his coat pocket. He cleared his throat and stared at the floor.

What? started Elaine. She stared at nothing, her lips frozen together. She heard someone talking—friendly talk. Her arm was warm; her entire right side was getting warm. The man swallowed, and cast a furtive glance at the blonde curtain of Elaine's hair. The clock. She heard the clock. Her neck suddenly twitched, jerking her head a quarter turn toward the man. What? She saw the floor. The man breathed slowly and deeply. Something touched her cheek, and warmed it. Then she felt
the presence of the man. She saw his coat in the corner of her eye. He sensed her watching him, and looked at her. Then he smiled and put his left arm around her neck, and clasped her left shoulder. He took his right hand from its pocket.

Elaine broke. She fell sobbing into the man, throwing her arms around his neck. He held her tightly. Her arms were around his neck, her fists clenched; she was sobbing and crying and hanging on tightly. Her right hand opened and the fingers worked up into the man's hair. Her left hand then opened, slowly, painfully at first, and released the crumpled, wadded scrap of paper. The crushed paper fell to the floor.