

This was in that week right after homecoming and we were headed up E Street, doing whatever it took to make it through tree shadows and around all the parked cars without getting sideswiped by anyone driving past. We'd been down at the Pizza Depot since school let out playing pinball, with that pipe organ blasting away and a million little kids running around.

But I swear, it was like none of that mattered. We were both on total fire that night, racking up game after game. After a while it felt like we'd gotten all caught up in some fever and nothing was gonna let us down. Not even when that guy Len (he's the old bastard who runs the place) yelled over at us as he was in the middle of pouring out another pitcher of suds to some dude, and all because I'd banged on the glass of Royal Flush right after it burned me.

By the time we played everything off and got another look at Steve's watch, it was past 10:30. Okay, so we'd lost track of time. But I didn't think it was gonna be any big deal. He was supposed to be staying over that night anyway; my dad had already said he could, even though there was school tomorrow. Besides, Tessa is always staying out late, not getting back until midnight or afterwards, and my dad never yells at her about it. And even when he does, you can tell he doesn't mean it (and she just keeps doing it anyway).

Steve and I were cracking jokes about stuff we passed. Like all the goofy cars along with weird-looking houses. Seriously, you should've seen him when we came up on that one place. It's got turrets along the walls and all the bushes out in front are cut into animal shapes like rabbits and birds. He was practically doubled over with it, like he couldn't breathe.

One thing though was definitely starting to bug me: Steve didn't seem to be getting the Collection at all.

"What is this now?"

So I was filling him in about it. All the stuff I've found that I keep in my jacket pockets, like a hand reel that actually works (with a hook and line and everything) and a pocket knife that's a little rusty but it still opens and shuts okay (I'd put some WD40 on the day I found it). Along with a bunch of other items, superballs and marbles and shit.

You could tell though that none of this was getting through.

"I see." He gave a sound like compressed air coming out.

"Don't laugh--"

"I'm not."

"Yes, you are."

And I brought up Diane for the first time. And right away he'd gotten this smile. Saying how he thought she liked me. A lot.

So I kept on about it. Asking if she liked me in that way or whatever.

Luckily for me though, he flashed another smile: "Yeah, I know what you mean..."

Then he grew all quiet. Saying how she talked about me all the time and kept asking about stuff I'd said. He even thought I was her favorite now (especially since she didn't seem to be into that Lustgarten guy anymore).

We finally made it up to my place. Just before hitting the driveway I had to tell Steve about my dad and how we're not supposed to make noise whenever we come in and that whole bit. Seriously, he hates it when people make racket right as they're showing up, especially if it's late. He's always going over his accounts, even into the wee small hours, and he acts like any sound at all might disturb him.

I was just going to head around the side yard down that hill and in through my sliding glass door (it's the same way I usually go whenever it's late and I don't want to get into another great big hassle). Only it didn't work out, not that time. Right as we were coming up alongside the porch the front door flew open and my dad was looming large.

Shooing us in with this massive arm swipe: "Where have you been?"

He had that same look too. It's like cops have dragged me in after some all-night manhunt and I'm all slumped over and bedraggled, this total desperado. And the only thing left is to go tearing down the WANTED posters hanging from every telephone pole and lamppost.

"Playing pinball."

"And why didn't the front lawn get mowed today? Like it was supposed to?"

Okay it's true, I'd totally forgotten about that. It was weird too: I kept thinking all day long that there was something I was supposed to do, only I couldn't ever remember what it was.

Actually, I couldn't have done it anyway because I hadn't gone back home all day. We even had dinner down at the Pizza Depot, a large with pepperoni and sausage. And pineapple on half (that was his idea, right?--I wouldn't ever order anything so lame). All thanks to this monster heap of change Steve's mom had dumped on him right before he left his house that morning.

My dad was staring over at Steve now.

"What's he doing here?"

"He's staying over--"

"No, he isn't."

"You already said he could."

This abrupt headshake: "That doesn't matter. You don't have any privileges around here until you learn to do your chores. All of them."

I didn't even know what to say to that. It felt like the walls were caving in, like I was getting buried under all this sheetrock. And the thing that kept going through the back of my head was how I'd just been walking along with Steve and talking about his sister (and feeling all on top of the world).

"If he can't stay over, I'll go out too--"

"Alright."

"Maybe we'll stay out all night."

"That's fine." A nod. "That's fine."

You know, it was like he'd been waiting the whole time to say that (I should've known I was doomed).

I turned to Steve: "Come on--"

He looked back at me all frozen in place for a moment, like some big weird sculpture of a guy. But he finally managed to kick it into gear and was moving along with me toward the doorway.

I didn't bother closing the door. I figured my dad could handle that chore, right? Then, just as we got to the lawn, you could hear it shutting back there.

It didn't slam or anything like that either. My dad did it all quiet, and the lock was clicking into place.

I swear to God, I don't know how I held it back. All I could think of was making this huge dent in one of his cars. Either that or maybe knocking the mailbox off its post as we went past. Then it would have to lay there on the grass until my dad could hammer it back up (or until he could hire some guy to come around our place to fix it).

We were headed for the cemetery (I figured that would be the best place to go to stay away from cops). It had started to get royally foggy too all of the sudden; it came gushing down off the tops of trees and flowed in around us like icebergs. In about two minutes we were drenched with the stuff.

Up ahead was that giant iron gate past where all the houses on E Street run out, along with the sign saying CEDAR KNOLLS. The two sides were swung wide open too (which figures: the only place you'd be welcome around my neighborhood is a graveyard). All folded back, like some giant bird about to flap its wings in a sci-fi movie.

"Don't they lock it up?"

"What for?"

As soon as we got through, he was taking off to go check out those major tombs on the left. They're a bunch of family crypts, dating back to the days of the pioneers or whatever, all hewn from marble and with cast-iron gates all over the place (my dad was actually thinking about getting us one way back when). Okay, it's not exactly like I was bummed out about Steve taking off right then; to tell the truth, he'd been starting to get on my nerves a little.

I took a seat on one of those concrete benches in that diamond of grass with curbs all around and roads leading off (I guess it's so all the mourners can drive through or whatever). And I'd forgotten to get another cigarette off him, so now all I could do was sit there and wait.

It was a splendid view too. The fog had gotten even thicker, so now it was nothing but pea soup everywhere you looked. Seriously, you could barely make out the closest headstones (they were just these blurry little stumps).

Overhead the sky wasn't black anymore, but some pale dim color like milk. It felt cold too, a lot colder. Maybe because my hair was getting soaked (I could feel all these drips skittering down my neck from the fog). Or else it was because I was sitting on top of a slab of fucking concrete.

But I didn't feel like standing up. To tell the truth, I didn't feel much like doing anything. Like in one of those old sourdough stories about the Yukon, Jack London or whatever, where some guy gets stranded in the snowy wastes and grows all tired and numb and starts thinking about slitting his horse open so he can crawl inside in order to survive the night (right before he freezes his poor stupid ass to death).

And that's when I saw it. Or him. It looked like somebody was walking by the front gate.

I blinked a couple times and squinted. Nope, I definitely wasn't seeing things. There he was, right ahead of me a ways. Moving through the fog and coming in my direction.

All of which woke me back up right away. Seriously, it was like this alarm clock going off in my ear. I knew it couldn't be Steve; he was still off on his voyage of discovery to the right. So I figured it had to be a cop.

Who else could it be? Somehow or other one of them had followed us in there without us knowing about it. We hadn't heard a car pull up, but that would figure. They're always pulling shit like that, sneaking around at like five miles an hour, so slow you can't hear their tires, creeping up right behind you to spring their trap. It's so you won't have time to ditch your

weed or think up any excuses or whatever (besides, they just like scaring the shit out of people, especially if it's juveniles).

So now I'm figuring we'll get busted for curfew and they'll call up my house and wake my dad, and--even though the whole thing was his fault for kicking us out--he'll probably ground me for the rest of the century. I was thinking about trying to get away. I figured if I headed over in the direction of Steve, maybe we could both ditch the guy, doubling back around and blitzing through the gates. Or else we could lose him somewhere around the place (amongst the many sepulchers).

By then though the stuff had gotten so thick I didn't know if I'd be able to find Steve. It was like I'd probably go blundering around and trip over somebody's tombstone and end up breaking my neck. Talk about a great way to die, right? Being killed by a graveyard.

So I just sat there. I didn't move a muscle for like five minutes, like this gargoye.

The guy kept getting closer too. And now I could see that he was moving in a kind of jerky way, like this bear up on two legs.

Okay, I felt a chill go through me right then. This slashing cold zip down my backbone (and not just because I was freezing my ass off). It kept right on heading toward me. And I was just trying to decide whether to make a run for it at the last minute, or else sit there and wait for whatever fate had in store. When it came ambling out of the mist, like this curtain had been pulled back.

And I finally got it figured out: I saw his arms stretched out wide like Frankenstein.

Steve let out this guffaw. "I freaked you out!"

"Shit, don't do that--"

"You were scared."

"No, I wasn't."

"Yes. You were." He had an all-knowing smile as he stood there above me.

"How'd you get over here?"

"I snuck around."

"I thought it was a cop."

"Oh right."

"I did."

He grinned. "I thought we came up here to get away from cops."

So just like that I was standing up (I figured I'd finally had enough of his bullshit). And right away he got locked into this classic kung fu position: one leg like an anchor and the other one extended and ready for kicking.

Just like Master Caine.

So I sat back down again. Dropping into place like a rock.

He tried flexing a foot in my direction, then came unraveling out of the whole thing. "You never do kung fu with me."

"And I never will." I kept on staring up there: "Well, I don't want to get killed."

"You are...a wise man."

Busting out with a laugh. And slumping down onto the bench while unwrapping his latest pack of smokes.

"Don't be so loud."

"Why not?" And all wagging his head with it (I mean, you could tell he was going through another rebellious phase).

"It's late. We should be quiet."

He had another smile now, like he was playing it for all it was worth. "Not gonna wake up anyone around here."

His grin grew bigger. Like he was daring me to join him in his unruly ways.

I looked away.

"No. Bad joke."

"Yeah, I'd say so."

When I turned back around, his smile was hanging there in midair.

"Do you want cops to hear us? We're not that far from the street."

"No, I don't want cops to hear us."

"Then keep it down."

"Okay." Letting that one out all raspy (still ready to crack up any second).

Three o'clock had rolled around and all he'd been talking about for a while was how hungry he was. He kept asking me if there was anything open that late in my neighborhood, like a 7-11 (or maybe even a Denny's). But it's pretty much of a late-night desert around there, like everything else is in San Sereno (seriously, there might as well be a door in front of the whole place that they lock up around eleven and flip over the sign saying CLOSED).

The only thing I could think of was that Jack In the Box, but it's all the way down E Street so that was pretty much out of the question. I figured there would be cops prowling everywhere and there was no way I wanted to get busted (not if I could help it).

That didn't stop him from harping on it though. He kept saying how it was so late that cops wouldn't even bother driving around. According to him, they would all be off scarfing up donuts or else shooting the shit with each other back at the station. Seriously, he was starting to sound like this real veteran on the force (you had no idea how many episodes of Adam-12 it took to come up with all of that).

"What if they're eating at Jack In the Box?"

"They're not gonna eat at Jack In the Box. They have food back at the station."

"I thought they ate at diners."

"Not at three in the morning."

He said he'd come up with something for me too. Just to sweeten the pot (he had a little money left over from playing pinball).

"What if we run into one anyway?"

He gave this giant gawk up at the sky: "I'll buy them something too." With a ragged laugh. Like some guy stranded out in the desert, all parched and in tatters (and doomed to wander the dunes).

Anyway, he finally talked me into it. And we were heading back out through the gate onto E Street. Into this total alien realm.

Seriously, you couldn't believe how weird everything looked that late with the fog wrapped all around it. The houses were high on some cliff, like they were up on Mount Rushmore or somewhere, and all the cars were like props from some amusement park ride. You couldn't hear a sound the whole way down except for our footsteps crunching right through the middle of this huge spooky dead place.

We made it to Halcyon Lane. Heading past that one gas station, the place where my mom used to go because the guy gave out free glasses and

shit for filling up the tank (don't ask me why--she always just liked to snap up the bargains or whatever). On the other side were those offices in that cluster of blocks that looks like it's made out of giant Legos. Like it's supposed to be this real village of healing, Doctorland or something.

You could just make out the Jack In the Box through the mist. All bright and beaming with his head in the clouds (and menus shining away underneath).

"There's no cars."

"That's because it's so late. We're probably the only ones still up."

We came around to the side and that's when it hit me. The whole place was dark. And not just the drive-thru window but that back part where the grills and French fryers are (and the room right next to it, the place with the tables and chairs).

I kept right on walking though. Almost like if I just stayed moving the lights were gonna come on any second and there'd be guys back there flipping burgers and some chick would be leaning out that little window (asking us for our orders). But everything was sealed up tight as a tomb. Like in one of those movies right after the Bomb hits, where everything is this ghost town. With nothing but huge tangled clumps of metal wherever you look and the wind blowing dust everywhere.

"It's closed."

"It's supposed to be open all night." I rattled away on the door handle. Then I cupped my face to the glass and stared in at all of it.

He looked in there himself. "When were you ever out this late?"

"We drove by it once. Coming back from a trip." I could feel my jaw moving against the sides of my hands all slack and empty, like I was dead. "Me and my dad. With my mom."

Finally we both stood up. "I guess it must've been the weekend."

We went trudging back toward the street. Only right as we came up alongside the clown, Steve leaned back to give it this colossal kung fu kick.

Seriously, it sounded like a rifle shot, all ricocheting off in the distance like that. And you could see that whole wall of plastic shudder, like it was about to keel over and collapse. Like any second now the clown was gonna be heaving this faceful of burgers onto the asphalt.

It was pretty funny. Or it should've been anyway. Only right afterwards Steve was just looking straight ahead, all stony-eyed and lantern-jawed. As we kept on the move.

We finally made it back up to my house. There it was, with my dad's cars all circled around like this wagon train or something. Then we were heading past Barnett's old place (the one where he used to live, back when we were both still in junior high). And his new place, or the one that's supposed to be his anyway (if his dad ever gets around to finishing it).

"What's this?"

So I had to fill him in about it. How they've been working on it for months and months and all the snags and snafus that have crept up along the way. Seriously, it's like every time I run into Barnett there's some new problem with wiring or plumbing or city planning (this real mountain of red tape).

They'd gotten the front wall finished by then, behind that huge chain-link fence. But the place still looked all abnormal. I mean, more like a funhouse than a real one. Okay, there is a front door--or at least a spot in the middle where you can tell one is supposed to go, all boarded up with plywood for now--but the rest is nothing but these weird skinny little windows like slits of glass all around. They're not even in there straight, but at all these crazy angles.

"It looks stupid."

"Yeah, it does." That's pretty much what everybody says. But I wasn't really thinking too much about it by then.

We'd reached Country Club Lane and began to climb (I figured that would be the best way to stay away from cops, to head for the hills). The pavement was like some long black carpet flung at our feet, winding its way through an overcoat of fog along all these houses on stilts, like a bunch of wooden storks standing there in the mist. We got onto the sidewalk, the one on that side (don't ask me how, but somehow Country Club Lane was able to spring for their own sidewalk), and continued our ascent.

All of a sudden Steve stopped dead: "How about Gary's new house?"

"What do you mean?"

"We could sleep in there." His whole face was lit up with it.

"Really?"

"Sure."

"How would we get in?"

"It's still being built." He gave a slap. "We can open a window."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah." Then he'd gotten this smirk: "How are you going to lock up a place when it's not even finished yet?"

"Oh yeah."

But he was already heading back down there, flying headlong like some horse bolting. I went hightailing it in his dust and finally caught back up with him on E Street.

"Is it really gonna be any better?"

"It won't be as cold."

"It doesn't have a heater."

He just stared at me. "It's sheltered. It's got a roof."

"How would we get over the fence?"

"We can climb it." Then he was stopping dead again: "Do you want to keep walking around out here all night?"

The fence wasn't that big a deal, as it turned out. We both just grabbed handfuls of chicken wire and went clawing our way across.

Then we were heading around to the backyard past all these stacks and stacks of wood. Seriously, it was like they had a whole lumberyard stowed away back there. I kept stumbling over shit too, kicking into lumps of dirt everywhere. There were a bunch of little lights like spotlights all around the place and they were shining into my eyes through the fog. Like I was blind from the neck down.

Steve told me to look out for nails (it turned out his dad used to be a contractor so he knew all about this stuff). There was a long line of windows in back, and they were regular windows too (no more slits or any of that garbage). According to Steve, what we were standing on was dirt left over from the foundation; once they got all that hauled away, it would end up being the second story. All of which was highly illuminating, there was no doubt about that, but all I really wanted right then was to get inside and sit down.

He was reaching up to push on the closest window, trying to get it to move. He even tossed his smoke on the ground and started shoving away with both hands, only it wouldn't budge.

Steve stepped over to the next one to give it a try. To tell the truth, I didn't know why he was bothering. I figured they would all turn out to be locked right down the row and we'd be stuck freezing our asses off in the middle of a bunch of dirt clods and growing all half-dead from exposure (until the sun could come up and burn the fog off the next morning). But the moment he reached up to push, right away it came open. Just like that.

He gave a little jab of his fist as I hissed out an "Alright!"

He passed over to me the two packs of smokes he had left and jumped up onto the sill. Then I handed the stuff over to him so that I could give it a

shot.

It took a few tries before I finally made it up there (actually, he was a lot taller than me). It felt like one of those things that they're always making you do for gym class too, to qualify for the presidential physical fitness badge or whatever. Anyway, I finally hoisted myself through and dropped down to the floor.

He slid the window closed behind us. And it shut tight, like a seal.

We were looking around at our surroundings. Not like there was that much to see, especially not at first with our eyes having to get used to everything. Mainly it was lumber and sawhorses, along with tarps and flats of plywood. There was one cleared-off place in the middle and we both took a seat there.

Steve had been right about one thing anyway: you could already tell that it was warmer in there (or at least not as cold). And the wood wasn't hard either, not like that concrete bench had been.

He said we couldn't get too settled in though. According to him, contractors sometimes got started as early as dawn.

I could make out a little more stuff now. It wasn't totally dark in there, as it turned out. There was a lamppost right across the street and even through all the mist it came blazing in a row of little slits high up on the ceiling. All the way to the top.

It was like some cathedral in there. Like having this church for your living room. It was a pretty bizarre arrangement, there was no doubt about that; it was hard seeing what Barnett's dad had been thinking when he'd conjured up that whole construction scheme.

I got another smoke off of Steve. I'd started chaining to stay awake (besides, at least it was something to do).

He gave a smile after taking in our surroundings: "It's getting pretty smoky in here."

"You think they'll notice?"

"Maybe we should air it out."

"Shit, it's freezing out there."

"I meant before we left."

"Then they'll know we were here anyway."

He shrugged that one off. And we went back to puffing away.

Afterwards we were stubbing our butts on the floorboards and got all stretched out in our jackets. I was looking up into the distance of the ceiling.

Pretty soon the sun would be coming up and we'd be heading over to school in the middle of all that early-morning traffic. Then we'd be out on the front plaza, telling Lustgarten and Spacemonkey and Obersdorf and whoever else was around what we'd done. All about going up to the graveyard to stay away from cops, then our trip down to Jack In the Box at three in the morning. And the long journey back. And finally breaking into Barnett's new house (before it was even finished).

The more I kept thinking about it, the more it was starting to sound

almost cool. Not just this tawdry tale of us wandering around freezing our butts off and feeling hungrier than shit, but more like we'd been on the road living off the land and fending for ourselves. Like outlaws or pirates or whatever.

He'd stopped talking. I had my eyes shut, laying on my back with my head feeling all solid like a rock against the floorboards. I kept hearing sounds too, all these pings and wrenches and shit. I don't know what it was (I guess that's what people mean when they say a place is settling).

I must've fallen asleep somewhere in there. Later on my eyes were open and it was like I just knew some time had passed.

It was still dark outside. I couldn't see Steve at first either; for a second I even thought he'd flown the coop. Until I made out where he was, crouching over by one of the walls (in the glow from his cigarette).

"Hey."

"Hey."

"What time is it?"

"Almost six." Then he said: "We probably should get going. They'll be getting here pretty soon."

I propped myself onto my elbow.

"Did you get any sleep?"

I looked off into the gloom. "Yeah, I think so."

He gave this forlorn-sounding laugh. "I don't think I did."

I got another smoke off him. Which was when we got onto the subject of our finances. We figured we were going to have to hang out at some coffee shop while waiting for school to start, so it was time for us to pool our resources. It turned out that he had \$1.12 (he held his lighter up in spurts so that he could count his clump of change).

I didn't have to count mine though. It's what I've always got whenever I don't have any real money, like if my dad hasn't gotten around to paying me yet for the yardwork (all my services rendered). Those three pennies I found over by the canal one day, looking all rust-covered and corroded and shit.

"Three cents?" He gave a laugh. Once again I was keeping him amused with my eccentric ways, there was no doubt about that.

"Yep."

"Is that another part of your Collection?"

"Shut up."

There was no way he was gonna let me off the hook that easy though. "Why don't you have more?" I could see this grin like a jack-o-lantern around the coal of his cigarette. "I thought your dad was rich."

"So's yours."

"Well yeah, but he gives me some. Or at least he used to. My mom does now."

"My dad's got a lot of money, but he never gives me anything."

And that's true too. Okay, maybe every once in a while, whenever I've done enough acts of drudgery around the house--and after he's gotten done

griping about the crappy job I did--he'll throw a little pocket money my way. A few crumbs from the table. But Tessa's the main one around there. Same as always. Like for her sixteenth birthday she got a car. It's one of the ones in our driveway, the Mustang II. I mean, you know nothing like that's ever gonna happen with me. Shit, I'll be lucky if I get a Hot Wheels when I turn sixteen (if my dad even remembers it's my birthday).

Steve still wasn't done ragging on me though. Seriously, once he got hold of something like that he was like a Doberman or something (worrying it in his jaws). "Why do you bother carrying around that much for? I mean, what's three cents gonna get you?" After a moment he grinned again; I could just make that out, even though he'd doused his smoke and the streetlight had gone out (it was starting to get lighter in there). "Are you worried about vagrancy laws or something?"

"Shut up." Then after a second I said: "Together we have a dollar fifteen."

"Oh, I see." He gave this mock laugh.

So we got onto another subject. Talking about finding a bunch of money somewhere, stumbling across this major stash of loot. It was like that was all we really needed right then to solve our problems. And not anything left behind by the Mafia or dealers or whatever, where they're gonna come after you with machine guns blazing and probably blow your head off.

We were thinking more like something buried a long time ago, in days of yore. So there we'd be, digging away in some long-lost corner of San Sereno and we'd come across this treasure chest. Dragging it from the depths of the earth and busting off these rusty padlocks with a few whacks from our shovels and it would pop open and be overflowing with heaps of bounty. Gold reals and pieces of eight and Spanish doubloons. Seriously, nothing but Spanish fucking doubloons.

Or else maybe jewels, piles of diamonds and emeralds and rubies. We figured that was all it would take, and not just to make us rich but to get everybody off our backs. Like my dad and his mom and cops everywhere. It was like everybody would have to stop picking on us if we came up with something like that and we'd be these instant celebrities.

We weren't totally making this shit up out of thin air either. Sir Francis Drake was supposed to have landed somewhere along the coast of San Sereno County whenever he was doing all that sailing around on his frigate, exploring the bounding main or whatever. He probably left something like that behind from all those galleons he plundered, and there it still is, buried on one of the beaches. Just like with that plaque thing they found. All you'd have to know is where to start digging; if you just had a

map with a couple trees and a dotted line and a big X with an arrow pointing to it, like the one in Treasure Island, you'd be in business.

Steve let out this big laugh. "Actually, some of the stuff in here..." He pointed over at something with his cigarette. "Like that drill is probably worth five hundred bucks."

"No way."

He stared back. "I'm serious."

I squinted over in that direction. It was just a blob, this gray metal blob. "Is that what that is?"

"Yeah, I think so." He headed over there. "Yeah, it's like the one my dad used to have. Only this one is older, a lot older."

"But it's still worth five hundred bucks?"

"Oh, easy." He gave these serious, sober nods back (I could see his head flickering away in all those swaths of light from the windows). It made me want to crack up sometimes too, the way he would come out with major pronouncements. Like some teacher in front of class, imparting genuine nuggets of wisdom. "No, tools are..."

"It looks weird."

"Yeah." Then he shot a grin at me: "Wanna steal it?"

We both were laughing, just about busting a gut. There was no doubt about it, the guy could definitely crack you up (it was like he would come out with what everyone else was thinking but that nobody had the guts to say).

He let out quick no's with swipes from his free hand. Leaning over to set the thing down again, and acting all ponderous about it too (you could already tell that it was heavier than shit).

"Still, it'd bring in a lot of money."

"Who'd want to buy it?"

He scowled back: "Lots of people. Anybody in construction."

Okay, I don't really remember how it happened. I mean, the way the subject came up again and not just as this joke (but as something we were really going to go through with). Maybe Steve hatched the idea first, or else we both arrived at it together like this mutual brainstorm. Anyway, somehow or other we'd decided to do it: we were going to steal the drill.

It was all part of the master plan we'd cooked up. We figured we could hide it somewhere around my neighborhood, like in the bushes or else behind a choice boulder. Then later on we'd come back and get it, and after that we could sell it to the highest bidder. Steve said he knew this guy, some old guy who used to work for his dad as a carpenter, who would pay a lot of money for it (and with no questions asked).

"An old guy?"

"Yeah." He was nodding, all forthright and earnest. "He's cool though."

According to Steve, we could get fifty bucks for it (and that was a conservative estimate). And afterwards we could do whatever we wanted with our money, like maybe playing pinball down at the Pizza Depot all day long if we felt like it. And how were they gonna catch us anyway? Nobody had seen us break into Barnett's house, and probably nobody was gonna see us leave either. We figured we could always lay low a few days, then start spending our newfound windfall (all of it).

First off though we had to make sure that we were gonna be able to haul the thing out of Barnett's house without anybody growing wise. So Steve carried it back and forth under his jacket a few times in that little cleared-off space while I did my best to judge. The thing did look pretty bulky and it sort of stuck out on one side (and like he was saying, you couldn't hold onto it for too long because it weighed a fucking ton). But I figured it would be okay, or at least good enough for us to walk around with at six in the morning, as long as we kept close together and found a place to stash it pretty quick. And how many cars were gonna be out that early anyway? It didn't seem like that would be too huge of a hassle.

And so we took off. He headed back out through the window and I was handing the stuff down to him. No doubt about it, he was right about the drill being heavy (it was like lugging some car battery around). Then I went through and jumped down, and he reached back up there to slide that sucker shut.

You could at least see the ground now, which made it easier to walk. And the fence wasn't that big a deal either, not even with our extra cargo. I passed the stuff down to him after he went scrambling across, then I went tumbling over like some lizard.

The street looked pretty dim as we headed along, still the color of twilight. The whole neighborhood was fast asleep. Only every once in a while you'd hear this car come rumbling along like a crusader from the world of tomorrow, and we'd have to move in close and act all natural about it until they passed.

One time right afterwards he was just grinning away at me: "Are you gay or something?"

"Shut up." No doubt about it, the guy could be a real vexation sometimes.

Mainly I wanted to get past my house before my dad got up. Usually he starts stirring around at like 7:30 or so, but you never can tell with him.

Like if some major-league deal is weighing heavily upon his mind, he might be up at the crack of dawn or whatever.

So I went blitzing past my house, practically jogging away (with Steve loping along behind me with his hefty burden). The place looked all dead with the fog tucked around it, cold and white and frozen in that limp shade it gets right around dawn. Just before the sun makes its way over the horizon and aims one of those faraway orange arms of light in your direction, like it's staring down at you from some long icy corridor.

Then we were trying to find some place to stow the drill. We kept searching high and low, but the prospects were beginning to look pretty bleak, I had to admit. Okay, to begin with all the front yards in my neighborhood are lawns, so it was like being surrounded by a bunch of giant green rugs. And wherever there were bushes, they were right up by the houses, and we didn't want to go underneath anybody's windows, especially since we were gonna have to come back at some more normal hour to pick it up.

Maybe if we'd waited long enough we could've made it down to that old mansion and ditched it in one of those bird bushes. But Steve kept saying how he couldn't hold onto it for too much longer (he was having to stop like every two minutes now to get a better grip on the thing). And more cars were already starting to come too, you could tell. And the more witnesses there were, the more suspicious we were definitely starting to look.

We came up on that little creek, the one between the houses down a ways from my place. It's the only spot on E Street where there's any sidewalk at all, just a little stretch with maybe two squares of concrete over this little wooden-bridge thing in the middle of the asphalt.

To tell the truth, I wasn't even thinking about it (I still had my mind on ground level). But Steve started saying, "What about this?" And all jerking his head in that direction.

And at first when he brought it up I thought it would be too wild. Like maybe foraging raccoons would come along to dislodge our booty, or else all that water would be bad for the gears (but like he was saying, it wasn't going to be there that long anyway).

We climbed down the bank, scrambling our way to the edge of the water. Steve said it was perfect. And besides, what else did we have? Which was true. And anyway, I was getting pretty sick of hearing him complain about all the heavy lifting he was having to do.

So that was where we stashed it. He pushed it underneath some of the ivy, shoving the leaves over so it was all tucked away. When we climbed

back up and looked down, you couldn't even tell it was there. Like the place had been untouched for years.

We made it down to The Cakery. That little hole-in-the-wall place on Second Street that opens right at seven o'clock. We got there just as the waitress was swinging the door open wide and all greeting the brand-new day.

We got settled into one of the booths with our mugs of coffee steaming away in front of us (that's one cool thing about that place anyway: they let you sit at a booth even if all you order is coffee). The fog was finally starting to burn off. You could see it disappearing through the window behind Steve, being sucked backwards like by some giant vacuum cleaner. And more people had started to come in too, all these businessmen guys in suits along with ladies dressed up for the workaday world. While the waitress kept going past with her coffee pot, back and forth to service them all.

I felt tired as hell too all of the sudden. It just came crashing down on me like a total collapse. Any second now I figured I was gonna have to prop toothpicks under my eyelids like in some cartoon, or else maybe walk myself around in circles like a guy who's taken too many pills. Slapping myself in the face just to get some kind of reaction, pain or anything (whatever it took to snap me out of it).

We weren't even talking by that point. You just had to make it through, blink blink, to the next minute, then the next one after that. Hoping that the hour hand on his watch would move forward one more notch, and sooner or later (one of these days) it would be time for us to leave and we could get the fuck out of there.

It didn't look like that was ever going to happen though, at least not in our lifetimes. His watch seemed to be standing still. Seriously, I kept turning my head sideways to look (then wondering why I'd even bothered). His arm was laying there like a slab of meat at some butcher shop.

And we drank our coffee. Sipping and blowing away till it cooled, then gulping down the rest.

That was the worst part, I swear: sitting there waiting for another refill, right across from him in exactly the same predicament. Meanwhile watching all these cinnamon rolls and bearclaws that the waitress kept carrying by (just out of reach of our hungry mitts).

We had gotten something to eat ourselves earlier on. We'd each ordered up a donut as soon as we got there (that was all Steve could afford). Really though all I think it did was to make us even hungrier, like getting this sip of water in the desert.

I asked him what time it was.

"Seven forty. You just asked me that."

I was twisting his arm around to get a better read on his watch.

"It's seven forty!" He practically barked that out. "There's a clock right behind you."

"Oh yeah."

Actually, that had been just about the first thing we'd seen when we'd gotten there, the big dial right over the hallway leading to the restrooms. It was where we'd both gone before giving our orders (no doubt about it, it had been a long, long wait).

And now he was saying that maybe we should try and get some sleep. And at first I was nodding, like he was being all profound yet again. Then I realized he was talking about right then and there.

"Can you even sleep in here?"

"We can try." He shrugged out a smile.

And I was shrugging too.

So we both slid our stuff over, the mugs along with the plates, in order to make room. We had to sit there a few more minutes, waiting for the waitress to come out from behind the counter. Then, once she'd set sail on her mission back to irrigate everybody in those booths behind us, we put our heads down on our arms and I closed my eyes.

I was out. Just like that.

Only not into a coma or anything. And all of the sudden it was like I was floating along in some ocean, with just my head bobbing away.

I kept hearing sounds too. Okay, I guess it must've been from all the glasses and silverware in the place, but that didn't even enter my mind. Everything seemed sharp and twangy too, like some Hawaiian guitar.

Then I was awake.

Into another dream, crazier than the one before. There were faces everywhere, people sitting up at the counter. And voices like at some bus station. These weird corrugated echoes.

Steve's head was over there, eyes closed and lifeless behind his glasses. Like some bowling ball.

Then I was out.

Only this time skimming along the surface of the ocean, flying across the waves. Like in one of those boats that go so fast they heel almost straight up and can barely stay in the water.

The sea was bright, blinding right at my eyes like foil flashing; I tried looking away but I couldn't. Then there were people running somewhere and something pulled at me. Tugging my arm.

"Excuse me--"

I blinked over at Steve. Who was sitting up straight now, rapt and gazing at the waitress.

"You can't sleep here." As she reached across to clear our dishes away with a little smile.

We were heading up to the cash register so Steve could pay the check. And we were back outside.

We still had a bunch more time to kill. We'd long given up on going to school; that had been about the only thing we'd talked about while we were both in the booth, how we were too tired to survive another six periods of San Sereno High torture. So now we were gonna head back to my house and crash for maybe a day and a half, except we couldn't go up there right away since we had to wait for my dad to take off for work. His office doesn't open until nine (he usually gets there like fifteen minutes early, but I wanted to be safe and sure and leave him plenty of leeway).

So we were strolling along, all these aimless blocks. Everything looked haywire too. My face felt all pasty, like a big blob of dough, and my eyes were puffed up like I had a cold or something. I could even hear them blinking, these weird little clicks over and over again (it was strange). The sun had gotten pretty high up and the streets were glowing with that burnished orange look, including my dad's office, LaRochelle Associates. At the top of that one little hill.

Then, right as we were coming up on D Street, Steve had this major seizure.

He kept saying how we had to hurry to get past that one street. We couldn't be too conspicuous while we were standing there either; we had to remain lurking in the shadows of buildings. Finally he let me in on the reason for his panic attack: it was because his mom drove down there a lot.

"At eight in the morning?"

"Hey, she does sometimes." He just shot me this look all venomous or whatever and I didn't dare broach the subject again.

So there we were, waiting in the doorway of that one clothes store, Mervyn's. Getting ready to haul ass across the intersection as soon as the light changed. Which was what he did too, going into this total blazing sprint the moment it turned green (and all I could do was scramble along in his wake).

Anyway, once I figured we'd waited long enough, we got up onto E and started heading for my house. Along the way I was telling him to keep an eye out for my dad's car, the one he usually takes to work (we were on the other side of the street so we wouldn't be so noticeable if he was going in late). We definitely weren't out of the woods yet, not by any means.

"It's a Mercury Cougar. Just keep looking."

"Yeah I know, I saw it in the driveway." Steve gave me another one of his funny-guy smiles. "What are we supposed to do? Hide behind those trees?"

"Maybe."

He half-laughed. "Why is this such a big deal?"

"Because--" I didn't really feel like explaining it (I mean, wasn't it pretty obvious?). "I don't want him to know we're going back to the house."

"Why does it matter now?"

I just stopped dead there in the middle of the street. "Because he'll pull over and hassle us. He'll make a big fucking deal out of it, like he does with everything." I was practically yelling this out, but I couldn't help it (it was like everything had been building up and now all of the sudden it had gotten to be too much). "Do you want to run into him now?"

"No." He looked off with a totally weary face. "All I want to do is get some sleep."

We made it back up to my place. I definitely was glad to see only the MG in the driveway: no Cougar and no Mustang II either (actually, San Sereno High starts earlier than my dad's work so Tessa is usually gone way before he leaves).

We went barreling through the front door, spearheading this major invasion. Seriously, I've never been that hungry before in my life. We were marauding through cupboards and cabinets, the refrigerator and pantry like an army of total hooligans. It must've looked like in one of those movies they're always showing at school where a bunch of piranhas pick apart some cow carcass in like two minutes flat.

We made a whole slew of sandwiches like it was on some assembly line, meanwhile cramming cookies down our gullets and potato chips and whatever else was within reach (luckily, Tessa had just gone grocery shopping the day before). We even had ice cream for dessert: rocky road for me and chocolate mint for him. I started making fun of that too--since it's what my sister usually gets--until he told me to stop ragging on him the way I'd done with his pineapple pizza (no doubt about it, I'd really hit a sore spot there).

Afterwards we were lounging on the floor down in my room, backs against my bed. Like snakes with these huge bulges in their bellies, in the middle of digesting the latest catch (a couple of choice armadillos or whatever). It was kind of weird though: neither of us felt much like sleeping anymore. We figured it must've been all that coffee we'd chugged at The Cakery.

Steve reached over to turn on my TV and started flipping through the channels. It turned out to be another vast wasteland; seriously, there was nothing on but game shows at that hour. I figured it would be a good time to get high, since it seemed like we could use a little help getting to sleep. So I asked if he wanted to smoke some.

"Sure." He was grinning over at me: "I didn't know you had any."

So I told him all about it as I was digging it out of my dresser drawer. I just found this shit. Seriously. It was in a little baggie on the floor in the locker room one morning last year while I was dressing out for P.E. late and nobody else was around.

His laugh came exploding out down there: "You found it?"

"Yep."

To tell the truth, I hadn't even known for sure if it would work when I got it back home that day. It doesn't really look like pot; it's just this little

clump of weeds, like dandelions or something.

I remember standing there with the pipe in my hand--I was still using that one I'd made from a coke can--puffing away for a few hits and feeling like a complete idiot. Like it would just turn out to be Bermuda rye grass or whatever. I was even thinking that that was probably why they'd dropped it on the locker room floor, as this major prank or whatever, and now they were off somewhere yukking it up at my total freshman gullibility.

But then just a few minutes later it kicked in like a howitzer and I was flying. Seriously, I was rolling on the floor in my room and I couldn't stop cracking up for like an hour (I was just glad I hadn't tried it out when my dad was around).

So I got it out now, along with that pipe of my dad's I've been using for a while. The corncob one. And right away, as soon as he saw that Steve had to start laughing and pointing and making a big deal out of it.

"It used to be my dad's." I was right in the middle of loading the thing so I couldn't do much to counteract him. "He was just gonna throw it away."

That wasn't enough for him either. He even burst into song: "Come and listen to a story 'bout a man named Jed--"

"Shut up."

No doubt about it, the guy was proving a troublesome guest yet again. I gave him this real withering stare for a second, while he kept grinning back up at me. Completely unabashed.

"Maybe you don't want any."

"What?" Now he looked all blank-faced, like maybe his ears were no longer attached properly or something.

"I said maybe you don't deserve any. For making fun."

"Oh right." All staring up at me, like I'd turned into this total hall-monitor type right before his eyes (a real strutting little Nazi).

I passed it over to him after sparking it up and taking the first hit. And right away I started to cough (no doubt about it, the shit really makes you do that). He did the same thing too as soon as he took his, even though I'd tried warning him (telling him to go easy and only inhale a little bit at first).

I moved over to close my door so that none of the smoke could get out. And along the way I was telling him to watch out, how you had to be careful with this stuff (that it could sneak up on you).

"Careful of what? I don't feel anything."

"You will. Just wait a few minutes."

"Is this a set-up?" He smiled over as I sat down next to him. "Am I being set up?"

That was one of his favorite topics, there was no doubt about that. It

all came from the night we met (right after we'd left the homecoming game and headed over to Sharkey's Pizza to play pool), when I started sinking a bunch of balls in a row and they all thought I was a hustler. This real seasoned swindler.

"Yeah, I thought the same thing the first time I tried it. I didn't think it was going to work either."

It didn't take too much longer. Only a few minutes more and that was it. It must've looked like in one of those pictures right after there's been a major earthquake, with tons and tons of rubble and toppled chimneys (and a whole fleet of Red Cross trucks in the background). I mean, there we both were, stretched out on the floor. Laying there like beached whales. Like a couple of bodies bloated in the sun after battle. All sprawled out with flies buzzing around our heads. Just...left for stoned.

The TV was still chattering away off in the sky. And Steve was talking too now. I could hear his voice, only I had no idea what he was saying.

"Can you talk louder?"

"What?" He laughed (it sounded like he was coming from another time zone). "Are you not hearing me?"

"I feel like I'm losing the universe."

He let out this laugh like a bark.

"It's all fading away from me, man--" I was mumbling that into the carpet. "Fading away--"

"Fading away, fading away--"

Then all of a sudden I was in my bed (I couldn't remember how I'd gotten there). Face down and breathing into my pillow.

He stood overhead in the direction of the light. The bulb was like this sun blazing high huge in the heavens (I'd had to turn away from it). Asking where he was going to sleep.

I said I didn't know.

"Come on--" He let out this laugh, all insistent.

I kept trying to think, only nothing happened. I couldn't even remember what I'd been thinking about. "You have to get the sleeping bag." Flapping an arm out in the direction of the hall closet.

Another laugh. "Where?"

It was like I couldn't get the words out. Any words. All I wanted to do was to stop thinking. To sleep or pass out or anything. "I think I OD'ed."

I heard him saying the same thing.

"It's a bad trip."

"Yeah. It is."

Somebody was yelling off in the distance.

His mom. Standing over in my doorway all small, like I was seeing her through the wrong end of binoculars. Steve was there too right next to her.

Then they both were gone. Somewhere far away I heard the front door upstairs slam, like at the end of a long tunnel.

The overhead light was on. Blinding.

"Get up--"

I was being grabbed out of bed. Dragged by one arm across the floor.

"Come on--come on--"

Careening through my door into the hallway. Somehow I managed to kick up onto my feet, just trying to keep from crashing into the walls.

All the way upstairs and over to the kitchen. Where my dad dumped me onto the floor.

There were other faces up there. Barnett's parents, along with Tessa.

"So now you're a thief, huh?"

My dad reached down to slap my face hard.

Then he was talking to Barnett's parents. Acting all polite about it too, the way he always gets around his clients (or whoever else he's trying to wheel-deal). I swear, it's like you can't recognize him anymore. Like he's this completely different person from the way I see him every day.

He said how sorry he was about everything, and how he would pay for any damages that I might've caused by my reckless behavior.

"Your buddy told them where you stashed it." He was staring back down at me. "Gary's parents aren't going to press charges, otherwise you'd be going to jail right now."

Everything was a total blur, I swear. Like I was looking up through the bottom of a root beer mug.

"Thank them!"

So that's what I did (it looked like he was getting ready to clobber me again).

Barnett's parents went backing out the door as fast as they could. As he followed along behind, telling them over and over how sorry he was.

Afterwards we were sitting at the dining room table waiting for dinner to get ready and he couldn't stop talking about it. I mean, there's no way he's ever gonna let an opportunity like that go by, right? (the chance to make you feel like an even bigger moron than you do already).

He kept on saying what a damn-fool thing it was to do (I swear, that was even the word he used). And bringing up some further thoughts on the matter.

"At least if you're going to be a thief, do it right." He came out with that one about ten times. It was almost like it was okay with him if we swiped the thing (just as long as we didn't get caught).

"It had the guy's name engraved on it, Danny. But I don't suppose you two noticed."

"No, we did. We were going to file it off."

Okay, I know I shouldn't have bothered answering him--I mean, it's not like he was gonna listen to anything I had to say anyway--but we weren't that stupid. Or at least, not as bad as he was making it sound.

"Oh, for Chrissake." All he did was sit there staring at me. "You're even a lousy crook. You can't do a damn thing right."

So finally I got up and went barreling toward the front door. I didn't care about dinner anymore or if he was gonna come charging after me (the same as usual). I just had to get out of there and walk around for a while. Just to get away from him and all his shit.

This time he did manage to stay in his chair. Only he had to get in the last word, another one of his famous parting shots: "Yeah, get out of my sight." He growled that out like a bear behind me, this total carnivore. "I don't want to have to look at you."

