

2ND PLACE
RICHARD YATES SHORT STORY AWARD*DAVID CROUSE

STILL RUNNING

“WANT YOU TO *GUESS*,” I SAID. My father’s house was in the hands of the realtors, my father was in the ground, and there I was, playing games again.

“Are you okay?” Beth asked. I turned around to look at her, my jacket in my hands, and she stared hard at my face, like there was something wrong with my mouth or eyes. I must have looked tired. I had been through a lot the last few days, more than she knew, and all I wanted to do was sleep.

“Oh, yeah,” I said. “I’m fine. I’m fine. Now *guess*.”

“Abraham Lincoln,” she said, with an edge in her voice. “The Virgin Mary. The Wizard of Oz.”

“Leslie McKenzie,” I said, like the answer was obvious.

She grabbed the suit coat from me and slipped it onto its hanger, then reached into one of its pockets and pulled out a balled-up Kleenex. I took some loose black socks from the suitcase. She took those too, and stuffed one down into another, pairing them up. “Who’s that?” she asked.

“This guy I grew up with. I’ve talked about him before, don’t you remember? And he was thin as a rail, Beth. This guy was the fattest

thing you've ever seen back in high school and now he's a string bean. He's like the 'after' picture they use in the commercials." I was grinning like this was the most miraculous thing in the whole world, like it was something to put in the Guinness Book of World Records next to someone with seven-foot long fingernails. "The little weasel must have kept at it," I said, and I imagined Leslie McKenzie chugging down the side of the road in his jogging shorts. How many miles had he clocked up by now? Enough to get clear across the country, I figured, all the way from our hometown of historical Haverhill, Massachusetts. Even though I had been there that morning, when I thought about running those miles instead of flying them, it seemed so far away that it might as well have been Neptune.

Beth had reached the phone first when the hospital called. The ringing had interrupted a real steamer of an argument, and as she put the receiver to her ear, I had decided, in the way a person can decide something quickly and with detachment, that I was going to nudge the fight further along when she was finished her private little conversation. There had been something secretive in the set of her shoulders, the bend of her neck, and her whispered, "Yes." Unknown to me, the doctor had been telling her slowly and patiently that my father had died.

"Are you sure you're okay?" she said, as I pushed my empty suitcase into the back of the closet.

I shut the closet door, turned to her, and said, "Are you even listening to what I'm saying?"

"I'm listening," she said.

MY BUDDIES AND I, we had noticed Leslie was up to something, that first summer when he began to huff and puff around town. I have to admit that our feelings about it were very complex. Why shouldn't they have been? I mean, Leslie McKenzie, all two-hundred-fifty-something pounds of him, running down the side of the road. No, not running, not then anyway. Shuffling, staggering, half-sliding his sneakers through the gutter dirt. Anything, any word, but running. His eyes half-closed as if he were falling asleep, little fists balled at stomach height, the front of his T-shirt darkened with sweat.

Who wouldn't have been surprised and dumbfounded? It was an offense against the natural order of things. It was an offense against us.

We were content that first time to yell something out the window as

we drove by. We were heading to the beach, I think, and couldn't be troubled to even slow down for such a thing, but someone — I'm pretty sure it wasn't me — leaned out his window and yelled something

Knowing Erik it was a good insult, but to Leslie it must have sounded like a wordless yell. Just a whoosh of air as the car passed and the sight of our rear bumper as we sped off to the beach, or the lake, or the quarry, or wherever the hell we were going. One place was as good as another.

Leslie would have recognized the car, an '82 Chevy Impala with a long dent in the rear bumper. It pulls out of sight and what does he do? Does he speed up, angry now, using that stupid broken rear bumper, the duct-taped rear window, as a goal, a target? Does he slow down now that nobody's watching? Does he stop right there on the side of the road and double over and take big, rasping breaths? Or does he simply keep running at the same steady pace, eyes half-closed, as if we were never there at all? I've wondered about that.

I know what *we* did, not because I remember it specifically, but because it's what we always did in that car. We laughed and sang along to whatever song was on the radio, and jostled each other around if we were in the backseat, and we didn't say anything about Leslie. But I think we all knew what we had to do, because Leslie had plans. He had a whole summer, almost three months, and he had obviously hatched some kind of mo-fo scheme to recreate himself.

He had the resources to do it too, if not the motivation. His parents had already probably bought him a set of those expensive weights covered in plastic, the ones that look futuristic and effeminate at the same time. I mean, this kid had more sweaters than I had I-don't-know-what.

The hunch we all shared was confirmed by other sightings later in the week: the same road, the same time, the same duh-duh-duh expression, the same shirt probably. Henry Eubank's kid sister rode past him on her bike. Erik saw him too. And me. I saw him when driving my father's car to the grocery store to get beer and cigarettes and a few other things for him. I remember because I had a bag of groceries on the car seat next to me: a loaf of bread, dishwashing liquid, two gallons of chocolate ice cream, which was the only flavor my father ate. That's when I had the idea, although I didn't implement it until later, and Erik even took the credit for it for some fucking reason.

So it was definitely confirmed. Leslie McKenzie was planning some kind of image makeover. Lose a few pounds, grow his hair out longer and stop slicking it across the top of his head like a fifty year old bank

clerk, get a new pair of thin framed glasses and abracadabra, he was going to expect even more from the world. He had seen his opportunity — nobody was looking — and he was going to go for it, which was probably an expression he was going to end up using eventually, if he had his way.

It really pissed me off. I'm not exactly sure why, except that it seemed like he was trying to pull one over on me, on us. He was being all sneaky and passive aggressive. I'm not saying that we were angels in any way, not at all, but you had to think, what was this kid going to our school for anyway? He lived in that house up on East Broadway that had a wrought-iron fence around it, an actual wrought-iron fence, like it was a museum or something. His father, who was a doctor or lawyer, could have afforded to send him to Phillips Andover Academy and then he wouldn't have gotten any shit from us at all, because we never would have even known each other.

Here's another way of looking at it: our haircuts, the clothes we wore and the cars we drove—our parent's cars, really, other than Erik, who owned the Impala. All that stuff, everything about the way we looked, was so totally connected to who we were inside that the two were practically the same. That's one of the main things I remember from that time, the sheer simplicity of those drives in Erik's Chevy. Those trips were beautiful and almost spellbinding in their clarity.

But here is this guy who wants to open up this gigantic rift between himself — the person he is on the inside — and who he is on the outside. I mean, I shouldn't get angry — it's been years — but I still remember that watch he used to wear, and the shoes, and the smell of something kind of sweet like peppermint from him in gym class. And now he takes up running. He wants to make his own body into some kind of disguise, like he's Batman!

And he wasn't just running. If it was just that, well, I don't know, but there was other stuff going on. Once when I was walking by his house — sometimes I found myself walking by there for some reason — I saw him out on his lawn, lying flat on his back on a lawn chair wearing only swimming trunks and Risky Business sunglasses, fucking sunglasses. Just lying there, all four hundred eighty pounds of him, although by this time it was probably more like four hundred sixty something. And every single pound of it was working overtime absorbing those rays, just soaking them up in a way that seemed almost greedy.

Leave some of that sun for the rest of us, Porky, I wanted to say when I saw him there. I wasn't that angry or anything — I had more important

things on my mind — but it did miff me a little. My father was acting all crazy that day, I remember, and I had gotten out of the house and was just wandering around. And then I stumble across this, like I'm stepping in a turd. Well, maybe not exactly, but I'm just saying that there was *some* justification for what I did.

Sometimes thinking about my father leads me to think about his father, a man I never knew, and then his father, and further down the chain of sullen men with receding chins and a tendency to lose their hair early in life. When I think like this, it seems like there is something I can find if I keep going back and back and back, like this is all just as simple and difficult as digging very deeply into the ground. It's like there's *something* out there, on the edge of history, and that's the thing I can blame.

I DON'T KNOW IF WE'RE HAPPY," Beth said. This is how she put it the first time, when she began talking about separating, when she said she was thinking of moving in with her sister and getting her head together. There were a million things she wanted to do with her life, two million things.

Beth wants to be a physical therapist. She wants to take care of the elderly, give them comfort when they need comfort. I'm supporting her while she goes to school, and paying her tuition, and I like the idea of doing good *through* her, since that has never really been one of my areas of expertise. I'm a computer engineer, and although I don't like to talk about my work, I like it when she tells me about what she's learning. Sometimes she touches my hand and tells me the names of the bones in my fingers. I never would have imagined how many.

"We're not happy," she said, and her comment seemed like such a simple and basic thing that I hadn't even thought about it until she pointed it out. Like breathing or something. Happiness. I was dumbfounded.

"Hey, hey," I said. "What the hell?"

We were driving for some stupid reason, some soul-killing errand like getting paint for the bathroom or ant traps to put under the kitchen sink. I was listening to a good song on the radio and thinking about nothing except the car in front of me, which was going too slow, and the car behind, which was going too fast, and now we had to begin and end a conversation about the sorry state of a marriage in the ten minutes it was going to take us to get to Wal-Mart. She cracked her window

and lit a cigarette. "I'm happy," I said. "Look at me. See? Don't I look happy?" I curled my lips back and held them that way, mouth half-open and gawking. This would be one of the faces I would use to make my children laugh if we ever had any.

"Stop it," she said.

We drove for a little while in silence. We were almost halfway there now, and I had never thought of this particular store as being such a safe and comfortable place, but there it was, out there in my imagination, like a little beacon of goodwill and dullness. She finally said, "That's a scary face."

I thought, she's right, it would scare them, and I thought of their frightened little lips and eyes. Frightened by *me*, a person who had never intended any harm to anyone and who was just trying to make a stupid face so that his wife could share a joke at his expense. These are the kind of thoughts that can wear a person down.

Beth had never liked talking about having children. She did not like talking about my father either, my *upbringing*, as she called it, as if I had been raised at some private school in England and not in a dead little mill town in Massachusetts. I said, "This is a difficult period. I've been tense lately," which opened up another patch of silence in the conversation like I had cleared the words away with a machete.

She said, "It's more than that," but we were pulling into the parking lot. She would be thinking of my *upbringing* now as we discussed the difference between *mustard yellow* and *orange yellow* and *yellow yellow*, and so would I, and it felt like she had *pushed* me into that place, like she was putting these thoughts in my head. She was like one of these people who talked about bodily functions at the dinner table. It was inappropriate, is what I'm saying.

I parked the car and turned the key in the ignition and looked hard at her and said, "You know what? You're right. Do you want to talk about it right now? We can talk about it right now if you want. We're in no rush." It was hot out, and the air-conditioner was off because I was holding the keys in the palm of my hand, and we were already feeling it.

"No," she said. "That's okay."

"Are you sure?" I said. "Because there's no time like the present. This is a wonderful place to talk about it. We have privacy and we have a

view." I looked out the windshield at the neat grids of parked cars and steaming blacktop and errant grocery carts.

"Do you think of yourself as a good listener?" I said. "Because we have a lot to *share*. As you know, I have a lot to *get off my chest*." I smiled again and waited for her reply, but she opened the car door and stepped outside and I decided fine, have it your way, and caught up with her with a few long strides. There were clouds in the sky and I wanted them to just open up on us so that we would have to scurry into the store and get this day over with.

I could see the concerned faces of tired shoppers as they stepped outside with their cut-rate provisions, and I wondered if they were really any better off than Beth and me. They were using the same dish washing liquid, wearing the same jeans, and probably having the same arguments, right? We were all worried about the threat of rain and the cost of bacon and being found out by those closest to us. I put my hand on Beth's shoulder when we stopped at the door and felt her muscles tighten. "I just want you to talk to me," she said. "Sometimes I wonder if I know you. It's like you razed your whole history when you met me."

Which was not completely true, of course. When we met, I had been finishing up my seventh and last year of school, and I had told her how hard it had been. I hadn't boasted, not really, but she had been proud of me. She had said I seemed like someone who had his act together. I guessed she was probably in the process of reconsidering that now. I think if I had dropped everything right then, and turned and walked back to the car, she would have followed, and we could have driven *anywhere*. This was two weeks before my father's death, and I'm guessing that at exactly that moment he was watching television and drinking a beer and thinking about God-knows-what.

I said to Beth, "I love you." Or at least that's what I wanted to say. What I actually said was, "Let's make this quick and painless," which is what I think she wanted too. I think we were thinking exactly the same thing, which is not something that happens often between two people, especially when those two people are me and my wife.

I wanted to talk then, in the time it took me to grip the door handle, open the door and step inside. I wanted to tell her everything, which, of course, I did not, because we were being greeted by an elderly woman in a blue apron who seemed as much about getting in our way as saying hello. And then, weeks later, with my father in the ground, what did I tell Beth? That I had bumped into an old friend of mine, and man, was

I surprised – not just because he looked so good, but to even see him there at all, in that run-down little mill town.

“It seems like you don’t like this guy very much for someone who used to be your friend,” she said. She opened the closet and took out the suitcase and I remembered then that it belonged in the *hall* closet. We live in a very orderly house, and much of that is due to Beth. I took the suitcase from her and left the bedroom. She followed me. She said, “What happened back there, Gary?” She said, “What happened back there *really?*”

“I could ask you the same question, Beth,” I said, and my voice rose with mock concern. I couldn’t help myself. “You seem really upset. Did something happen while I was gone that I should know about?” I opened the door in the hall and threw the suitcase inside. I was trying to steer my anger in the right direction, away from her, toward the back of the closet. “Watch the walls,” she said. “We don’t own this house yet.”

“We,” I said. “Is that the royal we?”

“Sometimes you’re a hard person to be around,” she said, and she turned and headed toward the kitchen.

The tone of her voice was not lost on me. It was low and air traffic controller steady, the way I sometimes used to talk to my father, when I had the presence of mind. I could hear water running in the sink. “Christ,” I said. “Don’t you think I know that? I know that.”

THE NEXT TIME I SAW Leslie McKenzie I was coming back from the market in my father’s car. My father often ordered me out on errands right when he got home from work, partially because he was tired and lazy, partially because he wanted to be alone, I guess. This was fine with me, except that these trips were now kind of synchronized with Leslie’s running schedule, which was annoying, you know – driving by him like that – especially because I didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of changing my route.

That particular day I picked up Erik and we did a little roaming around, and of course we end up on Kirkland Street with Leslie up ahead of us, chugging away. Now, instead of speeding up, I decide to slow down, because I want to kind of loom behind him. I want him to see our shadow coming, like in some horror movie.

And then I remembered the idea I had the time before, except this time

I had someone riding shotgun, so I said to Erik, "Open up the ice cream." My father always wanted me to pick up the same stuff – six pack of Miller, a pack of Marlboro's, maybe some toilet paper – and chocolate ice cream, which I know for a fact that he ate until the day he died. There was a half-empty carton of it in his freezer when I went back to sell his house.

Erik laughed because he must have known what I was thinking. Then he handed me the open container of ice cream. It was one of those square half-gallon containers. And as we loomed up on Leslie I whipped the container out the window and Erik yelled something like, "Eat it up!"

It was a one-in-a-million shot. The container hit him right on his ass and for a second he kept running, like it took a moment to register or maybe he thought he was getting dive-bombed. I didn't see the expression on his face or anything because I was stepping on the gas. Erik yelled something else, some fat joke he had probably used six times before, and then we were gone, leaving Leslie on the side of the road with a half-gallon of my father's ice cream melting in the dirt.

My father was in his chair with his clicker, blundering through the channels, when I got home. He yelled out to the kitchen as I came in. I noticed he had already eaten his dinner. His dirty plate was in the sink, smeared with ketchup. I opened the freezer and scrounged around as he wandered in and peeled the shrink-wrap off his cigarettes. He was still wearing his blue work shirt, so I knew he had had a rough day, and I was about to make myself scarce when he came in and said, "Where the fuck is the ice cream?"

"I forgot," I said. "Sorry." I began to walk to the living room. Out of the corner of my eye I saw him fiddling with his change, which I had left in the plastic bag for him the way I always did. He was doing the math in his head.

"Did you buy beer with my money?" he asked, in that voice of his that let me know in no way, shape, or form was I going to pull anything. Not on his watch, as he sometimes liked to say.

"No, I didn't buy beer with your money," I said, sing-songing his words back to him

He followed me into the living room. The sound on the television was all the way down and the stereo was on and turned to the classic rock station. Both of our eyes wandered to the television, where a woman

was turning letters on a game show, and for a second I thought the whole thing was a dead issue, but then he said, "How you make it through the day is a mystery to me. What the hell is the matter with you?" It was like a nudge, like, come on, let's see what happens.

"Oh, shut the fuck up, it's just a carton of ice cream," I said, or something like that.

And then suddenly the music on the stereo kind of turned inside out, is the only way to describe it, and my head filled with colors, and the room grew long and narrow, like I was standing down the end of a long corridor instead of in the center of my father's living room. That's when I realized that I had just been cold-cocked. Not a wide, sloppy punch either. No, this was the kind of punch that a boxer throws, a hard jab right to the center of my face that immediately took every last ounce of fight out of me. My legs were just not registering anymore and the top of my head felt warm, like my skull was filling up with blood. This was a punch designed to hurt, and it did, but I didn't fall.

Instead, I had a vision. A vision caused by pain and shock and not magic or God, but a vision nonetheless. I closed my eyes and felt the blood coming down my chin like I was a baby dribbling food out of my mouth and then it happened. My head filled with light. Light and something else. A vision of my mother, and not my mother as she was twelve years ago, not the mother in the pictures, but my mother as she would have been if she had lived and aged alongside her son and husband.

She was standing in front of me and smiling and there was an expression on her face that I couldn't read, a mix of disdain and attraction, like I was some kind of exotic food she didn't know if she should eat or not. I wasn't sure why she was there, and in that second that I saw her my feelings moved from happiness to annoyance, because she seemed to be withholding something from me. She had a secret and no way no how was she going to share it with me, her only son and a person who had just been sucker-punched by his own father, which is one of those exclusive clubs you don't want to join.

I wanted to tell my mother that I loved her and missed her, of course, but I also wanted to tell her that I had secrets too, just so we were on equal footing, so to speak. The last twelve years of my life, actually, had been one big secret from her, because she was dead and I was alive. And that made me feel strong and sad at the same time.

Then she was gone, and although just a second before her face was so

vivid, all of a sudden I had absolutely no idea what she looked like, like I never saw her at all. The next thing I knew I was sitting on the couch and my father was pushing a glass of water into my hand. "Come on, drink it," he said, and so I took it and put it to my mouth.

"You sure have a way of getting under my skin," he said, and I looked up. He was pacing the room. I had never seen him walk that way before, and something about it made him look kind of small and feminine. I got the feeling that if I stood up and just laid into him right there and then, there would be nothing he could do to stop me, but my legs felt real weak, so I just took another sip of water and listened to him talk.

I could build palaces out of the things my father didn't tell me. That's the stuff I remember now as much as what he did say, and that's what he says sometimes when he's pacing around that room in my memory. He tells me about the last year of her life, which must have been difficult, and about his own childhood on a farm in upstate New York, and my mother's childhood too, in Haverhill, the place he ran away to at eighteen, the place he died at sixty-seven.

He sometimes told me about the job he used to have in Lawrence, and my mother, and he when he talked this way he spoke as if he was still puzzled and even a little amused by their absence. He would kind of make a noise at the back of his throat and say, "Your mother and I used to eat Chinese food in bed," as if this was some habit he had outgrown. It was like a little window would open and close in the same second. But today he looked at me and said, "What are you looking at me like that? Are you waiting for an apology?"

"No," I said, and there was such control in my voice, like I was walking from here to there on a thin wire. I hoped there was.

"There's no reason for me to apologize," he said. "Do you know what I've been through? You don't know." It was like we were in an argument, an argument he was losing, but I wasn't even saying anything. He said, "I put a roof over your head. And I don't ask for much back, do I? What do I ask for?" He looked at me like he expected an answer. There was a pleading quality in his voice.

"I'm sorry," I said, and my face crumpled like I had told him to go to hell. It was like I had hauled back and slapped him. He closed his eyes and tilted his chin up like he was listening to music playing in his head.

He said, "Don't say that. Don't *you* apologize. Please. I don't want to hear it."

“Okay,” I said. “Okay.”

“And don’t tell me you understand, okay? I don’t understand you and there’s no way that you understand me. Let’s just agree on that.”

“Okay. Okay. Okay.”

When Beth told me that he had died, I remember feeling that he had tricked me somehow, that he had *escaped*. I remember Beth repeating the doctor’s words to me as she held my hand, and me thinking—not thinking but feeling—that he had gotten away with something.

I’m guessing I showed no sign of being upset, because that’s the way I am. It’s like I just kind of leave my body, like whoosh, and I’m floating outside myself, like I am alive and dead at the same time, a body on the earth and a ghost up above watching and wondering about these funny little people down below.

She told me that he had died about three hours before, that it was a heart attack (his second), and that he actually managed to drive himself to the hospital, which is only about five blocks from his house (she referred to it as my house because it’s the house I grew up in). She asked me if she wanted me to book my flight for me, and I said, no, no I can do it. She looked at me like I’m some math problem she was trying to figure out.

“I’m not angry,” I said. She always thinks I’m angry.

REMEMBER TELLING ERIK, “I’m going to hurt him,” but when it came down to it, I only touched Leslie McKenzie once, and that was to help him. I stood over him and rested my palm against the sweat-covered curve of his back and I even asked him if he was okay and you know what he did? He hissed something beneath his breath and pulled away, like I had leprosy. Then he stood up and began to shamle away from me like he was drunk and I knew then that it was over.

For weeks Erik and I had been following him around in Erik’s car. He changed routes, but we always found him. I mean, how far could he go on two legs? When Erik got a job and a new circle of friends along with the job, I used my father’s car when I could. I remember driving up alongside Leslie and sort of veering over to him like I was going to hit him and knock him down in the gutter, which of course I would never have done even if you had paid me. It was just a joke, and if it was a joke that got out of hand, well, we were just dumb kids, and maybe it

was a way of bringing balance to his life, a life that would probably soon be full of parties and girls at a nice college. I wanted him to remember me, I guess.

“I want to hurt him.” That’s what I *actually* told Erik. Not *going to*, but *want*, which is a very different thing. We were in Erik’s room, where I had been hanging out for a day or two until things blew over at home. We were listening to music and passing a bowl between us, and as we took hits off it, my mouth loosened up and my mind cleared. “I want to hurt him in places he didn’t know existed,” I said, and I leaned my head back and blew some smoke at the ceiling. I was thinking of Leslie McKenzie’s heart, which I imagined as something large and soft and ripe, like an expensive fruit from a tropical country.

Erik took the bowl from me and held it in front of his mouth. It looked like he was staring right into my eyes, right down in *my* heart, but he was really just looking at my nose, which was red and swollen. He was probably wondering what something like that must feel like. What had I told him? A fall down the stairs? The door of my car? Something like that. One of the many things I said.

He coughed a little and passed back the bowl. I saw his face as a mask of my own, but this was not true. I know that now. He said, “Let’s go see a movie or something.”

“I don’t have the money,” I said, although I had ten dollars in my pocket. It was my father’s money, taken from his nightstand. I had taken it just to hold it, I think, to have it for the night, although when I had closed my fist around it I had been planning to spend it all on a couple of six packs.

“I’ll pay,” he said, which is the first time I had ever heard that offer. He turned the bong to me and said, “Let’s just leave him alone,” and I stood up and left without a word, because how much help had he ever been to me, anyway?

That night I saw him down by the river, running along the boxboard drainage ditch against the flow of water, as if he were following it back to its source. He had been picking odd hours to make appearances lately, early in the morning when the streetlights were still on or later in the day, when the blacktop was beginning to cool. He wore a headband now, black, like he was protesting or grieving or something. My father was asleep and I was driving his car like it was my car, aimlessly, with the radio turned down.

I pulled up next to him so that he was in between the gully and the car and although my window was rolled down, and I could have carried on a conversation with him if I just raised my voice, I didn't say a word. He didn't turn his head. He didn't even quicken his pace. I think if he had just said *something*, or stopped running, I would have gunned the engine and taken off, but no, he was determined. Although he looked like he was going to cry.

"Where're you headed?" I finally yelled. It was the best joke I could think of. I was drinking a can of Coke, and I picked at the tab and made a little plucking sound. The car was running really nice, as well as it had ever run, and I wondered if my father had worked on it or had someone work on it. If so, that made my problems worse if he found out I had taken it, which he probably would. "Hey," I said. "Where you headed? Do you need a ride? I'm going to Texas. You can come along if you want."

It was like talking back to a movie. It was like he was running a *real* race, and I was just a distraction, and he was going to win if it took everything in him. I glanced away from him and up ahead. The road split away from the ditch up there and headed into town and then back around to my neighborhood. He was going to continue to follow it up the hill to the boxboard. I said, "Why the hell are you running here anyway? This is probably the worst place to run in the whole town."

It was like I wasn't even there. I revved the engine, but he didn't look. He just narrowed his eyes a little, and not even like he was angry, more like he was focusing on something, squinting at it because it was far away. The road was veering away from the ditch now, splitting into a fork, and I was going to go right and he was going to go left. That's when I gave the wheel a sharp jerk. The car lurched to the left, right at Leslie, and he dropped out of sight like the earth had swallowed him up. I slammed on the brakes and looked over my shoulder.

There he was. Not under my tires or even in the ditch, but rising to his feet amid a cloud of dust. I pushed the car into park and stepped out and I walked over to him. Blood was coming down his knees and he was covered with little pebbles and dirt. All that gunk stuck to him like glue because of all the sweat, and I think it made him look worse than he actually was, I guess.

I ran over to him and put my hand on his back and for a split second I felt his lungs working as he took a deep breath. Then he was walking away from me, still following the ditch like he was an animal or something and he looked strong and weak at the same time, the way

animals become when they're in pain. I knew that it was over, but I didn't want it to end, and I knew what was in store for me, because the car was almost as dirty as McKenzie now. It was almost completely dark, and I heard his feet scraping across the dirt as he headed up the hill, and I wanted to follow him wherever he was going.

"There's nothing to talk about," I told Beth. "Not really." I had followed her into the kitchen, where she was rubbing circles in a plate. I said, "It wasn't a good trip, obviously. That's all. And then I bumped into that guy. And you and I had that stupid phone conversation." I came up behind her with the intention of drying some of the dishes she was washing, but instead I put my hand on her back. I could feel her muscles moving as she washed the dish, her breath rising and falling. I said, "I think it's over between us, huh? After that phone call? I think that's just about it."

"You said that," she said. "I didn't say that. It might be, but I'm not the one who said it. I'm not the one who wants it that way. Not really."

I took my hand from her back and wiped my face hard, across the eyes. "Jesus Christ," I said. "I'm turning into a little girl. I can't stop crying. And the sun is out and everything. You don't need this. You must be up to your neck with this shit."

"No, this is new," she said, and she tried to smile. She pushed up against me and I closed my eyes and I could hear the water running down into the garbage disposal. I thought about how nice it would be to take a hot shower with her. We hadn't done that in a long time. There was something about spooning together after you showered, something virginal.. I didn't want to have sex or even kiss her much. I just wanted to sleep with her, and wake up to a darkened house and make dinner together. I wanted to slip out of this moment and under a particular blanket I had seen folded up in the closet. Beth put her hand to my face and said, "Tell me."

THE AFTERNOON OF MY FATHER'S FUNERAL, I called a moving company and asked them to lug everything in his house into storage. The realtor had told me how a furnished house sells more quickly, and that maybe I should even replace some of the shabbier items with new things, but I didn't care. The moving company said that they could have people over the next morning. It was like a burden had been lifted from my shoulders. It was like, lo and behold, the skies opened up and there was the sun.

I was doubly satisfied with myself, because this was exactly the kind of

decisive action that Beth has criticized me for *not* doing in our relationship. She says that it's my instinct to run down into myself. She says that I don't take action during the critical moment. She says that I have an incredible gift for hiding. I had to fight the urge to call her and talk to her, tell her I love her and see if it surprised her, even confused her. I wondered if I could still surprise her.

Instead, I decided that I was hungry. There were TV dinners in the freezer and I took one out and heated it up in the oven. I sat down at the table and I thought, this must be something like what he had been doing the day he died. The oven was making the little clicking sound it had made when I was a kid, like a stopwatch counting down. The silverware and plates and glasses were all in the same places.

The doorbell rang while I was eating. It was the movers, three of them, looking like they had done this a trillion times before. They took a walk through the house to see what they were in for, looking over the stuff in the kitchen and living room and bedrooms. It struck me then how differently they saw everything than I did. They are looking at things according to their size and weight. Is the kitchen table going to fit through the doorway? How heavy is the couch?

I wanted to tell them, that's the couch I sat in, and that's the chair he sat in, when we ate dinner and watched television. I wanted to tell them, you could build palaces out of the things we didn't say. Ridiculous, really. "I'm sure you guys can handle it," I said, and I walked back into the kitchen to finish my food. I could hear them talking about a football game. One of them had lost some money and one of them had won some money. They were laughing about something as I picked up the phone.

It felt strange calling my number from my father's house, as if I were young again and calling some future version of myself. I half-expected that future self to pick up the phone and say *hello, it's me, your future self*, which gives you some idea of my fucking state of mind, I guess. What could he have told me? A warning would have been nice. I would have appreciated it, and I would have told him something to the effect of, "Hey, don't worry about it, okay?"

I heard Beth's voice say hello automatically, as if she was expecting a salesman or wrong number. The movers were still talking, and I pictured them sitting on the couch. In a second, they were going to click on the television or something.

"Beth," I said, in a half-whisper, like I was calling from jail. I walked

over to the far side of the room, as far away from the movers as I could get and I said, "It's me." Outside, there were birds pecking at a little stone bird bath, and I wondered when my father had bought it, and why he had bought it, and what the hell it meant that he would do such a thing.

"It's me," I said again.

"Gary?"

"Yes," I said, and then, "Oh, God, I'm sorry. I really am sorry about everything. I promise I'll make it up to you."

My teeth were clenched and I was still whispering. My throat felt as if I had swallowed something hard and doughy. My face was hot and my voice didn't even quite sound like my own, but I kept talking. "I'm being honest with you," I said. "I really am. I believe in us. I want to work this out. I really do. I'm so sorry."

"Hey," she said. "Hey."

"I'm sorry."

"Tell me about the funeral. What happened? Did something bad happen, Gary?"

"Something bad," I said. "Something bad." And I laughed. "I don't *want* a divorce," I said.

"I haven't asked for a divorce," she said. "We haven't even talked about that."

"We will. We will."

She was quiet then, and I listened for the movers in the other room, but they weren't speaking anymore either. I swear to God, I could smell my father's breath on the damned phone. "You're the only person who understands me," I whispered. The movers had come back inside and they were knocking some stuff around.

"I *don't* understand you," she said, and I almost laughed again. I almost hung up. I listened to her breathing and I didn't know what to say.

"I'll be home soon," I said. "There are just a few things to wrap up here," and there was like a little *click* in my head and it was like we

were not talking even though she was still talking.

“Tell me what’s the matter,” she said.

“We’ll talk when I get home,” I said. “Now is a bad time.”

I hung up the phone and paced around the house quickly, like I was walking off a sprain. Now that the rooms were on their way to being empty, the place seemed gigantic. Or I seemed smaller, maybe that was it. I stood in the living room and without the curtains on the windows I could see out into the neighborhood in all directions: out across the small lawn that was already overgrown, and at the houses on the other side of the street.

I could see the neighbor to the left of us, who never got along with my father and who had probably moved to another town or was maybe dead too, which would have made my dad happy. I walked around the house some more, moving aimlessly from room to room. Upstairs, downstairs, then upstairs again. I guess I was looking for something, ridiculous as it sounds.

I found it in the cellar, although it wasn’t what I expected. On the far side of the room, near the oil burner, there was an old bureau and some other junk not worth moving. It was painted with three different colors of paint, and had gashes across the front like someone had raked it with a crowbar, but seeing it maybe the absence of everything else seem more pronounced somehow, and I suddenly regretted moving the things out.

Not just regretted, either. It seemed like the most stupid thing I could have done, stupid in the way that animals are stupid, moving by instinct and emotion. I saw myself as something shadowy and slippery, something sliding out on the edges of my own perception. In that moment I seemed like both hunter and prey, which is a romantic and fucked-up way of looking at yourself, although also maybe true. I walked over to the deep double sink where my father used to clean his paintbrushes in the early evening. I turned the faucet so I could splash some water on my face, but no water came out.

That’s when I remembered the spigot just outside and the length of garden hose attached to it. The fact that I had forgotten about it seemed like more negligence, so I walked to the bulkhead door and opened it to go out into the yard. There were five steps leading up to the bulkhead doors, running across a small space almost big enough to be a small room. Embedded in the concrete floor behind the steps there was a

small pump that whirled into action whenever it rained hard, saving the cellar from flooding. I remembered listening to it from my bedroom as a kid. It sounded like an airplane moving overhead, not something lodged in the ground down below me, but something circling the house. I suddenly wanted to tell Beth that story, and explain to her why it was important.

I also remembered that my father had stored things in that little space—tools and rakes and things he didn't want me fucking with. The stairs were held in place by simple slots on either side of the wall, and they could be removed with a tug. I removed two of the stairs, set them against the wall, and climbed inside. It was damp and cool in there, and I decided it was a pretty good place to be on a hot summer's day. Sure enough, there was a set of metal shelves in there, and something else.

He had not left letters or diaries or even photographs, but he had left something, and it seemed like as much a message to me as those other things would have been. It was a small handgun in a wooden slide-top box. I hadn't known he had even owned one. It looked like he had made the box for the gun. They fit together perfectly, and the corners of the box were sanded and cross-hatched delicately, the way I had seen him make a table. There was only one thing to do.

I slid the gun between my lips and tasted it, and I felt stronger than I had for a long time. Everything had been reduced to one simple decision, and the decision was mine to make. I could hear the mover's shambling around upstairs and I thought of them finding me down here. When I picked up the gun, I had known that I would not *actually* pull the trigger. I figured it did not have bullets in it either. I knew my father well enough to be sure about that.

It was like a game I was playing. But now I wasn't so sure, because had I ever been sure about my father, really? But it was still a game, I guess. It didn't really mean anything.

The movers were moving something heavy and cumbersome now, not lifting but *sliding*, sliding across my father's hard wood floors, and it was funny because I thought that I should complain to their boss. I could hear them giving directions to each other, and laughing again. One of them said, "Easy now. Easy now. Do you want me to put some grease on it?"

I pushed the barrel down on my tongue and then deeper, and then just like that I was vomiting down my arm, and then onto the floor when I

crouched down to one knee, and then again when I walked over to the little toilet on the far side of the cellar. I held both sides of the dirty little bowl, stained with thirty years of my father's shit and piss, and I just let it all go.

The gun was somewhere on the floor behind me. I would have to wash it off, and put it back in the box, and then do something with the box. Put it back. Get it away from me. I wouldn't check the barrel. Maybe I wouldn't even touch it again. It felt like I hadn't touched it at all, like it hadn't even existed, and that maybe I should just head upstairs right then and stop those guys before they did anymore damage.

"Hey," someone said. It was one of the movers. He had a lamp in his hand, and was halfway down the stairs. I turned my head away and wiped my face. "Are you all right?" he asked.

I SAW HIM THE DAY AFTER I EMPTIED out the house, in a mall of all places. I don't know why I was even there, except that it was only a year old and I wanted to be someplace without a history. I had a couple of bags of odds and ends with me—candy and some magazines, a shirt from Sears and a hammer because I wanted to smack the boards down the cellar back in position. I was in a pretty good mood, if you can believe it, and I was looking forward to sitting on the floor of the empty living room that evening and eating the candy with the magazines spread around me. Naked girls and stuff like that.

But mainly I was thinking how funny it was that just the day before I had slid the barrel of a gun inside my mouth. My very own mouth! It seemed hard to believe, even for me, the only person who had actually experienced it.

I could almost still taste the metal and something else, something black and almost sooty, probably left over from the last time the gun was fired. And here I was walking out of a Sear's department store with a nice new shirt and a bag of those gourmet jelly beans that taste like one hundred million different flavors.

There was an old lady in front of me walking super slow, and baggy-pants clown-kids off to my right giving me the once-over, and I realized then that not a single person would ever-not ever-know about what had happened that afternoon two days before. It wouldn't even require an act of will on my part. It was like it had already been decided.

That's when I saw Leslie McKenzie, and it was especially strange because he was not walking towards me. He was coming out of Sears

too, walking abreast of me about fifteen feet over but almost exactly parallel to me. He had a bag too, and for a second it just all seemed too strange to be real.

He was almost thin now, certainly thinner than me, except he had this weird little pot belly and a kind of sag in his cheeks and neck that seemed to be a holdover from the way he used to look. He was wearing glasses and a T-shirt and jeans, and he was kind of moving like he was in a hurry, like he had just remembered he had left the lights on in his Explorer. I glanced over at him and at first I thought, nah, no way, but then I stopped and looked closer. It was definitely him.

"Hey, hey," I said. "This is strange."

He didn't stop or even look in my direction, but I could tell that he recognized me. How could he not? I looked almost exactly the same as I did a decade before, bar a few pounds and a receding hairline.

I almost said something else, but he was up ahead of me now, and I would have really yelled, and not just yelled, but yelled at his back, which seemed pretty stupid and kind of, I don't know, beneath me. I almost did it. To be honest, I kind of wish I had.

Or even better, I just wish he had acknowledged me the very first time. That wouldn't have been very hard for him to do. I mean, it was definitely him.

I know exactly what I would have said to him too. I would have said, "Hey, how are you, man?" And then, after we had talked for a little while I would have said, "Remember that time?" and of course I wouldn't even have to finish the sentence, because I'd see it in his face. He would remember.

"I'm sorry," I'd say. "I'm very sorry." Very calm and even, like I was a doctor reporting some illness that really had nothing to do with me. There would be an awkward silence then, but I'd say, "Hey, it couldn't have been too bad. You look like you're doing pretty good."

He would smile and say thanks and he'd lean forward and speak quietly, like he didn't want anyone to overhear us. This was something that was meant for only us two. Oh, it would have felt real fine for him to do something like that. I can picture it.

He would tell me that he was doing better than pretty good, that he was great. He would talk to me about the good things in his life, right

there and then, and how he hadn't been held back by all that other stuff, which was, after all, in the past, and maybe not really that bad at all. He would do all of this just standing there in the mall with people sliding by thinking we were talking about the weather or something. It wouldn't even take that long. Two minutes.

Then he would reach out to shake my hand, but my right hand would be holding the shopping bag, so I'd reach out with my left and we'd sort of clasp hands-not a handshake really, just an awkward touch, like my grandmother used to touch my hand when she slipped me money. He would smile and I would smile and we would let go and as he was letting go he'd see something in the way I was looking at him and he'd say, "Don't worry about it. It's okay."

It wouldn't have been too hard for him to just let me off the hook like that, you know? Just let me off the hook.

"What do you mean?" Beth asks. We are in the bathroom. The shower is running and we're getting undressed. I'm looking at her jeans on the floor, and then at her naked thighs, then her face, because I'm sitting on the edge of the bathtub. She touches my shoulders. She pulls my T-shirt off over my head. The room is filling with steam.

"It wouldn't have been too hard," I tell her again, although I'm not sure she hears me, and I don't know where this is headed. I am thinking about my father again, facing me across our narrow living room. Could something as simple as words have saved him? "Listen," I say, and I try to start over.