Religion and Gender
RLST 27604/GNDR 20701

TTh 9:00-10:20

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Office Hours: T 10:30-11:30 or by appointment

In what ways are notions of ideas about religion and the sacred gendered and what are the consequences of this for how we live our lives? This class will be an introduction to the study of the relationships between religion and gender and the way these relationships play out in specific historical situations. Attention will also be paid to the relationships between religions and sexualities. Examples will be drawn from medieval to modern periods, and our attention will primarily be on Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Preparation in advance of class reading assignments and participation in class discussion is extremely important. For each class period you will be required to write a paragraph or so of reflections on the day’s readings, which you must post to the Chalk website for our class before the class period in which we will be discussing the readings (ie. before 7am the day of class). They will not be graded, but timely completion of them will count towards your participation mark. Your reflections can be: (1) an idea or theme that struck you, and why; (2) a question you had about the reading that would be suitable for class discussion, or (3) a point of clarification about something in the text. At the beginning of the class, I may ask you to share your thoughts with the rest of the class. Class participation will be worth 30% of your grade.

There are three written assignments for this class, described at the end of the syllabus. The first, of 3-5 pages in length is worth 20%, the second, of 3 pages is worth 20% and the third, of 5 to 7 pages, is worth 30%.

Books are on reserve at the Regenstein Library. Many of the readings are on e-reserve or are available on the web. The following books are on order at the Seminary Coop Bookstore:

*Women, Gender, Religion: A Reader*, ed. E. Castelli, New York, 2001

Course Outline

Jan. 3
Introduction

Theories

Jan. 5

Jan. 10

Jan. 12
Origins
Jan. 17
Genesis 1-3; Qur’an, surah 1 and 2:1-39 eg.
http://www.usc.edu/schools/college/crcr/engagement/resources/texts/muslim/quran/002.qm.html
http://www.usc.edu/schools/college/crcr/engagement/resources/texts/muslim/quran/001.qm.html
Tangerine Scarf, pp.8-9

Jan. 19

Jan. 24

Jan. 26

Jan. 31

Feb. 2
Interlude: Gender and Text
Assignment #1 due

Bodies
Feb. 7

Feb. 9

Feb. 14
John Boswell, Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality, “The Urban Revival” and “The Triumph of Ganymede,” ch. 8 and 9, pp. 207-241, 243-266

Feb. 16
Mary Ann Clark, ch. 2 “Gender,” pp. 25-46 and ch. 4 “Initiation,” pp. 72-85 in Where Men are Wives and Mothers Rule; Randy Conner, “Rainbow’s Children: Diversity of Gender and Sexuality in African-Diasporic Spiritual Traditions” pp. 143-166 in Fragments of Bone

Feb. 21

Feb. 23
Interlude: Comparative Religion in the Girl with the Tangerine Scarf
Assignment #2 due

Vells


March 8  Reading Period: No Class

**Paper Assignments**

**Assignment #1:** On February 2, we will be discussing how women are depicted in the Gospel of Luke. Your assignment is to examine how men are depicted in the same Gospel and to write a 3-5 page summary of your findings, due on the 29th. You should come prepared to discuss your findings in class that day. You may focus on one section and do a close reading of a particular passage or set of passages, or you may do more of a survey of the whole Gospel, or some longer part of it.

**Assignment #2:** *The Girl with the Tangerine Scarf* is a text that draws in a wide array of other texts. Some of these are quotations from different scriptures, woven into the story, but others are the capstone quotations that begin each chapter. Your task is to choose one of these quotations, find out its origins and figure out how it is used in context. Write a review of approximately 3 pages and come prepared to discuss your findings in class on Feb. 23.

**Assignment #3:** You may think of this assignment in the nature of a take-home exam. It should be about 5-7 pages in length, and you have two different options. Pick only one. Due Tuesday, March 13.

A) Most class periods in this course have included at least two texts that consider the same problem in religion and gender from different perspectives. Sometimes these were opposing arguments about the same question; sometimes they simply looked in different ways at an issue that illuminated different facets of it. My goal in choosing them and putting them in apposition to each other was to stimulate questioning and reflection. Choose an issue that interests you and at least two sources that illustrate it from different perspectives, and discuss the questions they pose and how you would answer them.

B) Khadra Shamy is not Mohja Kahf, but Kahf uses Khadra’s life to illuminate issues of religion and gender that concern her. This paper is your chance to reflect on issues of religion and gender that affect and matter to you personally. You may write in the form of a short memoir, like I. Karve’s article about pilgrimage, or an autobiography, or you may follow Kahf and put your musings in the form of a story.

Both A) and B) will be graded on the basis of how well they show an understanding and assimilation of the topics and readings we have discussed in class.
the girl in the tangerine scarf

A NOVEL

Mohja Kahf

CARROLL & GRAF PUBLISHERS
NEW YORK
"Mama, what's heaven?"

"Heaven is where you have all your heart desires."

Khadra figured that meant heaven was Square One. There were swings on long silver chains. You wriggled your butt into the seat and you got pushed up-up-up and you learned the lines of the Fatiha:

"Bismillah arrahmani 'rabim!" Khadra sang as her father pushed her up. Green grass full of dandelions fell away beneath her.

"Alhamdulilahi rabil alamin," Eyad yelled on the next swing. He knew how to pump for himself.

"Arrahmani 'rabim!" Khadra called as she climbed into the blue atmosphere like an astronaut.

Her father, pushing her one day, said, "Lift your legs hard going up. Push them down hard going down."

Suddenly Khadra could do it. "I can swing! By myself, I can swing!" Treetops flashed beneath her feet. "See me, Mama, see me, Baba!" And they saw.

In Square One, their mother used to be willing to wash Eyad and Khadra’s bottoms. Your butt hung in the bowl, chin to knees, legs dangling down the white porcelain, you called, loud’s you could, 'Mamaaaa! Pleaseease wash my boooortom!' And she came hustling. The big fat water tin was too heavy; a grown-up had to lift it.

One day she got a pink plastic watering can. It was small and light. "Look. You pour the water with your right hand like this, and you reach down with your left hand like this, and while the water runs over your pee-pee or your poo-poo place, you wipe and wipe and clean yourself."
"Ew."

"No ew and no phew about it, young lady. Everybody has to clean their own bottom in this world."

Alessandra-called-Sandra was from Mexico and spoke only Spanish until day before yesterday. A lot of the children in Square One were from other countries besides America. The American kids in Square One didn't seem to know yet that they were supposed to be better than the rest because it was their country. Their parents were all students at the same university.

Khadra and Eyad spoke only Arabic at first. You didn't need to speak the same language to exchange friendship bracelets, and this Khadra and her Spanish-speaking friend did. Khadra couldn't remember how she learned the new language, only that she opened her mouth one day and English came out. Pretty soon after Khadra and Alessandra-called-Sandra could talk to each other in English, they started making fun of the little Japanese boy in South Building for saying "I sleep in my loom."

"Chinese, Japanese, dirty knees, look at these!" Khadra and Sandra taunted, pointing to their non-existent breasts at the last line. The boy cried and went whimpering home.

"You be'd mean to that boy," Eyad said to her. He was two and a half years older than Khadra.

"You're not the boss of me!" She stamped her foot.

Her parents called her and her brother in: prayer time. "Haftha go," she said under the Shy Tree to Alessandra-called-Sandra.

"Why?"

"Haftha pray."

"Can I come?"

Khadra made her wait at the door, by the tin box where the milkman left cold bottles of milk at fajr time. "Mama, can Alessandra-called-Sandra watch us pray?"

"Welcome, welcome to the guest," Mama said, sitting the little girl on a slatted wooden chair. "The guest is always welcome." There wasn't much furniture yet. America put wardrobes right into the walls, saved you having to buy them.

Her father was calling the qad qammat. Eyad spread the prayer rugs. Khadra ran to splash her ablutions fast-fast so she wouldn't miss the bow and have to do the whole ralat over.

"Elbows, please," her father said gently, when she skidded into her place on the prayer rug, dripping water.

She stuck her elbows out for inspection.

"Dry elbows," he said, shaking his head. "Do over."

"What if I just wet my elbows?" Khadra said.

"That's not ablution," her mother said. "Ablution goes together, can't be separated. It's all one thing. Like prayer."

*May my hands be instruments of peace, may my mouth speak only truth, may this nose smell the fragrance of holiness, may this face shine with the light of compassion, may these ears hear the Word of God, may this neck bend in humility to the One, may these feet walk in paradise.*

Alessandra-called-Sandra swung her little ashy legs against the chair, bumpy-bump, while the family whispered the Fatiha, arms folded across chests. When they all knelt down-down-down, and put their faces on the floor for the sajda, her legs went still and her eyes got round as saucers.
THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
Spring 2005
History 29902/Religious Studies 22400/Fundamentals 24901
TOLKIEN: MEDIEVAL AND MODERN
TuTh 9:00-10:20 Harper Memorial 130

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Now we must praise the Guardian of Heaven,
the might of the Lord and His purpose of mind,
the work of the Glorious Father; for He,
God Eternal, established each wonder,
He, Holy Creator, first fashioned
heaven as a roof for the sons of men.
Then the Guardian of Mankind adorned
this middle-earth below, the world for men,
Everlasting Lord, Almighty King.
---Caedmon's hymn (trans. Kevin Crossley-Holland)

J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* is one of the most popular works of imaginative literature of the twentieth century. This course seeks to understand its appeal by situating Tolkien’s creation within the context of its medieval sources and modern parallels. Themes to be addressed include the problem of genre and the uses of tradition, the nature of history and its relationship to place, the activity of creation and its relationship to language, beauty, evil and power, the role of monsters in imagination and criticism, the twinned challenges of death and immortality, fate and free will, and the interaction between the world of "faerie" and religious belief.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS
Your grade will be based on an in-class mid-quarter exam worth 35% of your grade and a final project worth 45%. This project will be due on May 31 for graduating seniors, June 7 for all other students. A description of the final project can be found following the syllabus. You should begin work on this project as soon as possible. You are required to do all the required readings for class and to come prepared to participate. Additionally, we have established a bulletin board for this class on the chalk website, and you are strongly encouraged to post questions and comments there. We hope this will provide a useful forum for more informal discussion of topics of interest to the class. The final 20% of your grade will be based on your attendance in class, participation in class discussion and participation in the discussion fora on the
Chalk website. At a minimum (C+ level), you should post at least three such comments (about 300 words each) in the discussion fora for the course readings (“Tolkien as Scripture”).

BOOKS AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE AT THE SEMINARY CO-OP BOOKSTORE

_______, The Silmarillion, ed. Christopher Tolkien (New York: Del Rey, 1985).
_______, Unfinished Tales, ed. Christopher Tolkien (New York: Del Rey, 1988).
_______, The Lost Road, History of Middle Earth [=HME] 5, ed. Christopher Tolkien (New York: Del Rey, 1996).
_______, The Tolkien Reader (New York: Del Rey, 1966).
_______, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, and Sir Orfeo (New York: Del Rey, 1980).


All other readings are available on reserve in Regenstein Library and, where possible, on e-reserve. For readings from LotR, references are given by book (not volume!), chapter and page number. The page numbers are those from the Houghton Mifflin editions available for purchase and on reserve in Regenstein. You are free to use any other edition, but you should make sure that your reading follows the sections in the syllabus. Please note: as it is a prerequisite for the course that you should have already read LotR, we reserve the right to add to or change these readings from LotR as the quarter progresses. All such emendations will be posted in the Announcements on the Chalk website.

READING AND DISCUSSION ASSIGNMENTS

March 29 Tolkien as Scripture
Tolkien, “Mythopoeia” (handout)
Map of Middle-earth in the Third Age

March 31 Genre: Fantasy and Fairy Tale
Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories,” and “Leaf by Niggle,” in The Tolkien Reader
_______, Smith of Wootton Major
_______, Letters, nos. 109, 199, 215.

Recommended:
Flieger, Splintered Light, pp. 21-31.

April 5 Story and Tradition: “Sources” I
_______, LotR, bk. I, chap. 9 (pp. 154-157).


April 7 Story and Tradition: “Sources” II
Tolkien, “The Lost Road: i. The opening chapters; ii. The Númenórean chapters,” HME 5
_______, The Notion Club Papers, part 1, HME 9, pp. 155-211.
_______, Letters, nos. 24, 163, 213, 257.


Recommended:
Flieger, A Question of Time, pp. 61-88, 117-41.

April 12 Style: Poetry vs. Prose, High vs. Low
_______, “The Adventures of Tom Bombadil,” in The Tolkien Reader
_______, LotR, bk. II, chap. 2 (pp. 233-64); Appendix F.II: “On Translation” (pp. 1107-1112).
_______, Letters, no. 165.

Ursula LeGuin, “From Elfland to Poughkeepsie,” in The Language of the Night, pp. 78-92.
Recommended:


April 14 History & Time; Nature & Place
Tolkien, “Father Giles of Ham,” in The Tolkien Reader
   ________, LotR, Preface to the second edition; “Note on the Shire Records,” in the Prologue (pp. 13-15);
   ________, “The Line of Elros: Kings of Númenor,” in Unfinished Tales.
   ________, The Notion Club Papers, part 2, Night 64, HME 9, pp. 222-33.
   ________, Letters, no. 53, 151, 183, 190.


Recommended:


April 19 Language and Names
Tolkien, “Tale of Eärendil,” Book of Lost Tales, HME 2, pp. 252-277, 312-322.
   ________, LotR, bk. II, chap. 1 (pp. 226-32); Appendix E: “Writing and Spelling,” and Appendix F.I: “The Languages and Peoples of the Third Age.”
   ________, “The Lhammas,” and “The Etymologies,” HME 5
   ________, Letters, nos. 297, 347.


“The Seafarer,” ASW, pp. 53-56.

Recommended:


Flieger, A Question of Time, pp. 143-74.

April 21 Language and Music
   ________, “Ainulindalë,” HME 5
   ________, “Ainulindalë,” HME 10, pp. 3-44
   ________, Letters, no. 96.

Genesis 1-2 [any translation or edition]
Flieger, Splintered Light, pp. 49-79, 87-95.

April 26 Creativity & Free Will; Power & Beauty I
Tolkien, "Vánaquenta," in The Silmarillion.
———, "Quenta Silmarillion," chapters 1-13, in The Silmarillion
———, Letters, nos. 52, 153, 156.


Recommended:
Flieger, Splintered Light, pp. 81-86, 97-126.

April 28 Creativity & Free Will; Power & Beauty II
Tolkien, "Akalâkâthë," in The Silmarillion
———, "The Fall of Numenor," HME 5
———, "A Description of the Island of Númenor," in Unfinished Tales
———, "The Palantir," in Unfinished Tales


Recommended:
Flieger, Splintered Light, pp. 127-38.

May 3 Creativity & Free Will; Power & Beauty III
Tolkien, "Of the Rings of Power and the Third Age," in The Silmarillion
———, LotR, bk. I, chap. 2 (pp. 46-55), chap. 5 (p. 106), chaps. 11-12 (pp. 190-194), chap. 12 (pp. 207-209); bk. II, chap. 1 (pp. 215-217 and 225-226), chap. 2 (pp. 236 and 259-64), chap. 10 (pp. 386-392); bk. III, chap. 1 (pp. 403-5 and 409), chap. 2 (pp. 414-416 and 428), chap. 3 (pp. 434-37 and 446), chap. 5 (pp. 485-90), chap. 6 (p. 510), chap. 9 (p. 550), chap. 10 (pp. 564-69); bk. IV, chap. 1 (pp. 600-02), chap. 8 (pp. 688-92); bk. V, chap. 4 (pp. 793-96 and 802-11), chap. 6 (pp. 821-825).
———, Letters, nos. 66, 186, 191-192, 246.


May 5 MID-TERM EXAM

May 10 Monsters and Critics
Tolkien, *Medieval and Modern*

______, *LotR*, bk. IV, chaps. 9-10 (pp. 711-13) (Sethó)
______, *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again*, chaps. 2 (trolls), 5 (Gollum), 8 (spiders), 12 (Smaug)


Recommended:
Tolkien, "Narn I Hln Húrin: The Tale of the Children of Húrin," in *Unfinished Tales*


May 12 Jewels and Trees I
Tolkien, "Quenta Silmarillion," chaps. 1, 7-8, 24, in *The Silmarillion*  

"Pearl," in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl and Sir Orfeo*, trans. Tolkien


May 17 Jewels and Trees II
Tolkien, *LotR*, bk. I, chap. 2 (pp. 43-44), chap. 6; bk. III, chap. 2 (pp. 430-432), chap. 4 (p. 450), chap. 7 (p. 529), chap. 8 (pp. 530-40), chap. 9 (pp. 550-58).


"Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," stanzas 1-21, 80-101, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl and Sir Orfeo*, trans. Tolkien


May 19 Immortality and Death I: Elves and Men
Tolkien, *LotR*, bk. I, chap. 3 (pp. 77-78), chap. 11 (pp. 186-190), chap. 12 (p. 209); bk. II, chap. 7 (pp. 344-357), chap. 8 (pp. 358-370); bk. IV, chap. 5 (pp. 662-65); Appendix A.v: "The Tale of Aragorn and Arwen" (pp. 1032-38)


Flieger, *Splintered Light*, pp. 139-46.

**May 24 Immortality and Death II: Men and Hobbits**

Tolkien, *LotR*, Prologue 1-3 (pp. 1-10); bk. 1, chap. 1 (p. 22), chap. 2 (pp. 43-44 and 61-63), chap. 4 (pp. 84-86); bk. II, chap. 1 (p. 221); bk. IV, chap. 3 (p. 624), chap. 4 (p. 638), chap. 6 (p. 672);

Appendix C: "Family Trees" (pp. 1073-77)


______, *Splintered Light*, pp. 147-74.

**May 26 The Meaning of Life I: Worship**

Tolkien, *Letters*, nos. 54, 89, 142, 211-212, 250, 310, 328.


Recommended:


**May 31 The Meaning of Life II: Cult**

Tolkien, *LotR*, bk. II, chap. 3 (pp. 266-267); bk. IV, chap. 8 (pp. 696-97); bk. VI, chap. 4 (p. 929).


Recommended:


**June 2 The Spring 2005 University of Chicago Tolkien “Happening”**
June 7  **Final Projects Due by 5:00pm in HM-E 686 (Fulton’s Office) or Swift 201 (Pick’s Inbox)**

**Additional Resources**

Recommended Readings (on reserve):

Weblinks to various Tolkienian sites on the Chalk website under “External Links.”
Dr. Nadler, the dentist, was eating the sole amandine luncheon plate at La Maison Blanche when she was paged.

"The psychic called," her husband said. "He says for you to call him right back, the next half hour. He has some errands to run this afternoon and won't be reachable after one o'clock. Same with me. I gotta go. See you tonight. Bye."

She asked how to make an outgoing call. She dialed nine first, as instructed, then the psychic's number. "This is Dinah Nadler," she said when he answered. "What's up?"

"We need to make an appointment," the psychic said. Then he blew his nose, making an odd sound, a long wet snort. "Excuse me," he said, "but it's just a cold. One of those sinus colds that started as an ear cold. My nephews were in last week from Boston with their mother, and they all brought these little coughs and sneezes with them. Cute but contagious. Well. What about this afternoon? It's important."

"Busy," she said. "I have appointments."

"How about tomorrow?"

"Four o'clock," she told him. "Not a minute earlier."

"Fine," the psychic said. His name was Herbert. "I'll be here, ready and waiting."

At four-fifteen she knocked at the psychic's apartment, which also served as his office. "Come in," he said.

"How's the cold?" she asked. She sat down in a shabby dark-blue overstuffed chair. She looked at the two pictures on the wall, one of a woodland stream, the other of a watermill, and immediately felt depressed.
The psychic’s nose was red from postnasal drip. “It’s getting better,” he said. “I’ll be over it by tomorrow. How are you, Dinah? You’re looking well.”

“I’ve been busy,” she said, stroking her forehead. “This afternoon, an impacted wisdom tooth—”

“Please,” the psychic said, holding up his hand. “No details. Dentistry doesn’t inspire me.” He frowned: In Southfield, north of Detroit, there were two psychics acknowledged to be accurate; this one, Herbert, was the younger. He was just starting out and was in his early thirties, but he had the darkened, somewhat arresting look of a man who has fought and won in a battle with schizophrenia. Under no circumstances did he ever make eye contact.

“So,” Dinah said, “what’s new?”

“The good news first. Buy Michigan Consolidated Edison,” the psychic said. “It’s shamefully undervalued and it’s going to go straight up. There’s going to be a merger, a reorganization . . . something, I don’t know exactly what. The Amalgamated is going to snatch it up. Okay. Next. Sell that little tool-and-die company you’ve been buying over the counter. That’s a one-way ticket to nowhere, that company.”

“Herbert,” she said, “you’re confused. My husband bought that. It’s in his portfolio, not mine.”

“A slight mistake,” the psychic said. “How’s your daughter? She must be . . . what? Three?”

“Four. She’s fine. She’s in nursery school. Is that why you called?”

“No.”

“Why did you?”

“Yesterday morning I got a terrible feeling about you. What are you doing?”

“What do you mean, what am I doing?”

“It’s a simple question.” He blew his nose. “Comprehensible. What are you doing?”

“I’m doing,” she said, “what I always do. I get up, I go to work, I go home.”

“Oh no,” the psychic said, putting his handkerchief away. “That’s not the story. That’s not the black spot on the horizon. We have another story here. That’s definite. Are you planning a trip?”

“Not until next summer.”

“You and Jake, are you in the market for a new house?”

“No.”

“It’s a black spot, Dinah. There it is, blinking, at the horizon, a blinking black spot. I just wish I could be more specific. I don’t get messages like this every day. Your daughter . . . Sarah?”

“Sally,” she corrected him.

“Sally.” He sneezed. “Is she all right?”

“Fine. Just as I told you. Fine.”

“Dinah, I don’t want to be indelicate. You and Jake. Are you happy? I don’t mean to pry.”

“Of course it’s prying,” she told him. “We’re very happy.”

“Something’s wrong,” Herbert said. “Something is wrong with me or with you. It’s not that dog of yours, is it? That Weimaraner?”

“Otto.”

“Yes, Otto.”

“Otto is fine.”

“Then I don’t know what’s the matter with me.”

“What did you see?” Dinah asked.

“Calamity,” the psychic said. “Not to mince words.”

“What kind of calamity?” Dinah asked, jarred.

“What kind? The Book of Job kind. I saw your whole life, your house, car, that swimming pool you put in last summer, the career, your child, and the whole future just start to radiate with this ugly black flame from the inside, poof, and then I saw you falling, like at the circus, down from the trapeze. Whoops,
and down, and then through the safety net. Through the ground.”

Dinah made a sound in her throat.

“Yes,” the psychic said, “that’s how I feel too. And after all this work, too, these years of dedication. I can’t get it more specific yet. I’m not pulling the specifics in on my antenna. I’m not getting that station. Please don’t go out to the backyard and start chopping down trees. Don’t try to get a pilot’s license. Be careful in your work.”

“I am careful in my work,” Dinah said.

“All this makes me nervous,” the psychic said. “I usually have these things in better focus.” He got up and scratched his scalp. Dinah noticed food stains on his corduroy trousers.

“I wish you’d change the pictures on the wall,” she said.

“My mother gave me that one,” he said, pointing at the babbling brook. “I bought the other one at K-Mart, to match it.”

“Well,” Jake said at dinner, “what did Herbert say?”

She put down her glass of wine, a 1976 Liberty School burgundy. “I wasn’t going to tell you.”

“That bad?”

“Worse. First he said to buy Consolidated Michigan Edison. Then he said, ‘quote, calamity, unquote.’

“What kind of calamity? Significant capital losses?”

“That’s the catch. It’s not the investments he’s talking about. This is personal. He started asking me about our marriage, if you can believe it. Him asking me about our relationship was a scene out of a Bergman movie. Grotesque. Anyway, he said he didn’t have anything in focus. We’re not supposed to do anything risky, he says.”

“We should stop going to that guy,” Jake said. “He was always north Detroit wacko, but at least we used to make money off of him.”

“Don’t forget what he told us about Northeastern BankTel.”

“I haven’t forgotten.”

“Up twenty points in five months.”

“I remember. We paid for the swimming pool with that tip. I haven’t forgotten Lincoln Tri-State Insurance, either.”

She raised the crystal wineglass to him.

Dinah was drilling a first upper left bicuspid when the nurse came up behind her. “Call Herbert,” she whispered. “He says he’ll be in all afternoon.”

Twenty minutes later Dinah was on the phone. “Well?”

“It’s not you,” the psychic said. “It must be Jake, your husband.”

“What did you see?” Dinah asked.

“Picture this,” the psychic said. “There’s a field, and a tree, and the shape of this tree is disgusting. It’s a disgusting tree, Dinah, I don’t know how else to describe it, gnarled and burnt but with this awful blue fruit still growing on it, like blistered plums.”

“What’s this have to do with Jake?”

“It has something to do with Jake.”

“What?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“Herbert,” she said. “I think we’d better stop this. If you can’t be specific, I don’t think I want your help anymore. I can’t use generalized catastrophes.”

“I don’t blame you,” he said. “I don’t know what’s gone wrong with the signals.”

That night, as she was putting her daughter to bed, she smelled the air for gas. In the cold Michigan winter night the wind blew against the side of the house and against the roof, underneath which, bedded between the slats of the attic, the
Corning fiberglass insulation held the warmth underneath and the cold above. As her daughter fell asleep, Dinah listened carefully to the rhythms of her child’s breathing. She checked the room for sharp edges. Then she went downstairs, walked past her husband, asleep, mouth open, in the den, where he sat propped in front of the television set, Otto asleep next to him. In the kitchen she checked the burners on the stove. She went back into the den and shut off the VCR. Down by Jake’s dangling left hand, on the tile floor, beside the rug, there was a water glass, not broken. Falling asleep, he had dropped it. Dinah went to fetch a few paper towels, and Otto watched her as she cleaned up.

She returned to the kitchen and sat down at the circular breakfast table. She folded both hands in front of her as she listened to the click of the quartz kitchen clock above the sink. Feeling hungry, she opened the refrigerator and picked out a grapefruit from a group of five gathered in the crisper. From a drawer to the left of the sink, she took a four-inch serrated knife. Holding the knife and the grapefruit in her left hand, she opened the cupboard and took out a green glass plate with her right hand. As she took out the plate, the knife slipped from her hand and fell to the floor, where it slid toward the stove. She reached down and picked it up. Against her palm the knife’s handle felt smooth and cold.

She dimmed the light above the breakfast table with the rheostat switch and began to cut into the grapefruit with the serrated knife. Keeping her fingers out of the way, she sliced the grapefruit in half, then began to cut it into sections. She stood up again to get a spoon from the drawer. As she was sliding the drawer open, the doorbell rang.

She thought of Jake in the den, then shrugged her shoulders and went to the foyer. Without looking through the glass panels on either side of the door, she turned the lock. Standing behind the storm door was Gary Slominski, the paperboy, collecting. He wore a gray winter hat, army surplus overcoat, and brown boots. Dinah went to her purse in the front hall, on the first step of the stairs, took out six dollars, and went back to where Gary was standing on the stoop. “Thank you,” he said as she handed the money to him.

She closed the door, locked it, and walked back into the kitchen. She sat down again under the light and absentmindedly began to eat the grapefruit she had already sliced. She heard the furnace going on, blowing heat into the four corners of the house. From the living room came the sound of something striking the picture window, perhaps a bird blown into the glass by the windstorm. She decided to wait to check on it until she had finished eating. Then she heard a similar sound: some object, again, striking the window. At almost the same moment, the phone began to ring. She stood up, dried her hands on a dishtowel, walked over to where it was hanging, and answered it.

“Hello,” she said.

“It isn’t Jake,” the psychic said. “I was wrong about that.”


“I know. This is my last call, almost. I’ve called everyone I know. I just wanted to tell you it’s not Jake.”

“Good,” Dinah said. “I’m glad to hear that.”

“It’s everybody,” he said, and hung up.

Dinah put back the phone on its cradle, looked at the ceiling, then sat down again and finished the grapefruit. She put the yellow rind into a brown paper bag in the garbage can under the sink, and she rinsed the dish and the knife and put them in the yellow plastic dish drainer. Then she walked into the living room and positioned herself in front of the picture window. She looked down at the lawn, lightly covered now with snow. Underneath the window she saw a sparrow with a broken wing pulling itself in half-circles around on the grass. Beyond the bird she saw their ash tree; something about its shape and color gave her a shock.
Then, like a horn of announcement, Otto set up a howl. This was followed by a steady roar of barking. Dinah looked up into the sky, then turned off all the lights on the side table next to the sofa behind her. Then she went back to the window, cupped her hands on both sides of her face, and looked outside to see what was happening.
All Respects to Heaven, I Like it Here

One of the many things my brother, Corrigan, and I loved about our mother was that she was a fine musician. She kept a small radio on top of the Steinway in the living room of our house in Dublin and on Sunday afternoons, after scanning whatever stations we could find, Radio Éireann or BBC, she raised the lacquered wing of the piano, spread her dress out at the wooden stool, and tried to copy the piece through from memory: jazz riffs and Irish ballads and, if we found the right station, old Hoagy Carmichael tunes. Our mother played with a natural touch, even though she suffered from a hand which she had broken many times. We never knew the origin of the break; it was something left in silence. When she finished playing she would lightly rub the back of her wrist. I used to think of the notes still trilling through the bones, as if they could skip from one to the other, over the breakage. I can still after all these years sit in the museum of those afternoons and recall the light spilling across the carpet. At times our mother put her arms around us both, and then guided our hands so we could clang down hard on the keys.

It is not fashionable anymore, I suppose, to have a regard for one's mother in the way my brother and I had then, in the mid-1950s, when the noise outside the window was mostly wind and sea chime. One looks for
the chink in the armor, the leg of the piano stool shorter than the other, the sadness that would detach us from her, but the truth is we enjoyed each other, all three of us, and never so evidently as those Sundays when the rain fell gray over Dublin Bay and the squalls blew fresh against the windowpane.

Our house in Sandymount looked out to the bay. We had a short driveway full of weeds, a square of lawn, a black ironwork fence. If we crossed the road we could stand on the curved seawall and look a good distance across the bay. A bunch of palm trees grew at the end of the road. They stood, smaller and more stunted than palms elsewhere, but exotic nonetheless, as if invited to come watch the Dublin rain. Corrigan sat on the wall, banging his heels and looking over the flat strand to the water. I should have known even then that the sea was written in him, that there would be some sort of leaving. The tide crept in and the water swelled at his feet. In the evenings he walked up the road past the Martello Tower to the abandoned public baths, where he balanced on top of the seawall, arms held wide.

On weekend mornings we strolled with our mother, ankle-deep in the low tide, and looked back to see the row of houses, the tower, and the little scarves of smoke coming up from the chimneys. Two enormous red and white power station chimneys broke the horizon to the east, but the rest was a gentle curve, with gulls on the air, the mail boats out of Dun Laoghaire, the scud of clouds on the horizon. When the tide was out, the stretch of sand was corrugated and sometimes it was possible to walk a quarter-mile among isolated waterpools and bits of old refuse, long shaver shells, bedstead pipes.

Dublin Bay was a slow heaving thing, like the city it lureshould, but it could turn without warning. Every now and then the water smashed up against the wall in a storm. The sea, having arrived, stayed. Salt crusted the windows of our house. The knocker on the door was rusted red.

When the weather blew foul, we sat on the stairs, Corrigan and I. Our father, a physicist, had left us years before. A check, postmarked in London, arrived through the letterbox once a week. Never a note, just a check, drawn on a bank in Oxford. It spun in the air as it fell. We ran to bring it to our mother. She slipped the envelope under a flowerpot on the kitchen windowsill and the next day it was gone. Nothing more was ever said.

The only other sign of our father was a wardrobe full of his old suits and trousers in our mother’s bedroom. Corrigan drew the door open. In the darkness we sat with our backs against the rough wooden panels and slipped our feet in our father’s shoes, let his sleeves touch our ears, felt the cold of his cuff buttons. Our mother found us one afternoon, dressed in his gray suits, the sleeves rolled up and the trousers held in place with elastic bands. We were marching around in his oversize brogues when she came and froze in the doorway, the room so quiet we could hear the radiator tick.

“Well,” she said, as she knelt to the ground in front of us. Her face spread out in a grin that seemed to pain her. “Come here.” She kissed us both on the cheek, tapped our bottoms. “Now run along.” We slipped out of our father’s old clothes, left them puddled on the floor.

Later that night we heard the clang of the coat hangers as she hung and rehung the suits.

Over the years there were the usual tantrums and bloody noses and broken rocking horse heads, and our mother had to deal with the whispers of the neighbors, sometimes even the attentions of local widowers, but for the most part things stretched comfortably in front of us: calm, open, a sweep of sandy gray.

Corrigan and I shared a bedroom that looked out to the water. Quietly it happened, I still don’t recall how: he, the younger one by two years, took control of the top bunk. He slept on his stomach with a view out the window to the dark, reciting his prayers—he called them his slumber verses—in quick, sharp rhythms. They were his own incantations, mostly indecipherable to me, with odd little cackles of laughter and long sighs. The closer he got to sleep the more rhythmic the prayers got, a sort of jazz, though sometimes in the middle of it all I could hear him curse, and they’d be lifted away from the sacred. I knew the Catholic hit parade—the Our Father, the Hail Mary—but that was all. I was a raw, quiet child, and God was already a bore to me. I kicked the bottom of Corrigan’s bed and he fell silent awhile, but then started up again. Sometimes I woke in the morning and he was alongside me, arm draped over my shoulder, his chest rising and falling as he whispered his prayers.

I’d turn to him. “Ah, Jesus, Corr, shut up.”

My brother was light-skinned, dark-haired, blue-eyed. He was the type of child everyone envied at. He could look at you and draw you out.
People fell for him. On the street, women ruffled his hair. Workingmen punched him gently on the shoulder. He had no idea that his presence sustained people, made them happy, drew out their improbable yearnings—he just plowed along, oblivious.

I woke one night, when I was eleven, to a cold blast of air moving over me. I stumbled to the window but it was closed. I reached for the light and the room burned quickly yellow. A shape was bent over in the middle of the room.

“Corr?”

The weather still rolled off his body. His cheeks were red. A little damp mist lay on his hair. He smelled of cigarettes. He put a finger to his lips for hush and climbed back up the wooden ladder.

“Go to sleep,” he whispered from above. The smell of tobacco still lingered in the air.

In the morning he jumped down from the bed, wearing his heavy anorak over his pajamas. Shivering, he opened the window and tapped the sand from his shoes off the sill, into the garden below.

“Where’d you go?”

“Just along by the water,” he said.

“Were you smoking?”

He looked away, rubbed his arms warm. “No.”

“You’re not supposed to smoke, you know.”

“I didn’t smoke,” he said.

Later that morning our mother walked us to school, our leather satchels slung over our shoulders. An icy breeze cut along the streets. Down by the school gates she went to one knee, put her arms around us, adjusted our scarves, and kissed us, one after the other. When she stood to leave, her gaze was caught by something on the other side of the road, by the railings of the church: a dark form wrapped in a large red blanket. The man raised a hand in salute. Corrigan waved back.

There were plenty of old drunks around Kingsend, but my mother seemed taken by the sight, and for a moment it struck me that there might be some secret there.

“Who’s that, Mum?” I asked.

“Run along,” she said. “We’ll sort it out after school.”

My brother walked beside me, silent.

“Who is it, Corrie?” I thumped him. “Who is it?”

He disappeared towards his classroom.

All day I sat at my wooden desk, gnawing my pencil, wondering—visions of a forgotten uncle, or our father somehow returned, broken. Nothing, in those days, was beyond the realm of the possible. The clock was at the rear of the room but there was an old freckled mirror over the classroom sink and, at the right angle, I could watch the hands go backwards. When the bell struck I was out the gate, but Corrigan took the long road back, short, mincing steps through the housing estates, past the palm trees, along the seawall.

There was a soft brown paper package waiting for Corrigan on the top bunk. I shoved it at him. He shrugged and ran his finger along the twine, pulled it tentatively. Inside was another blanket, a soft blue Foxford. He unfolded it, let it fall lengthwise, looked up at our mother, and nodded.

She touched his face with the back of her fingers and said: “Never again, understand?”

Nothing else was mentioned, until two years later he gave that blanket away too, to another homeless drunk, on another freezing night, up by the canal on one of his late-night walks, when he tiptoed down the stairs and went out into the dark. It was a simple equation to him—others needed the blankets more than he, and he was prepared to take the punishment if it came his way. It was my earliest suggestion of what my brother would become, and what I’d later see among the cast-offs of New York—the whores, the hustlers, the hopeless—all of those who were hanging on to him like he was some bright hallelujah in the shitbox of what the world really was.

CORRIGAN STARTED GETTING drunk young—twelve or thirteen years old—once a week, on Friday afternoons after school. He’d run from the gates in Blackrock towards the bus stop, his school tie off, his blazer bundled, while I stayed behind in the school fields, playing rugby. I could see him hop on the 45 or the 7A, his silhouette moving towards the backseat of the bus as it pulled away.

Corrigan liked those places where light was drained. The docklands. The flophouses. The corners where the cobbles were broken. He often sat with the drunks in Frenchman’s Lane and Spencer Row. He brought a bottle with him, handed it around. If it came back to him he drank with
a flourish, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth as if he were a practiced drunk. Anyone could tell he wasn't a real drinker—he didn't search it out, and drank from the bottle only when it came his way. I suppose he thought he was fitting in. He got laughed at by the more vicious drunks but he didn't care. They were using him, of course. He was just another snootsy trying on the poornum shoes, but he had a few pennies in his pockets and was always prepared to give them up—they sent him to the off-license for bottles, or to the corner shop for loose cigarettes.

Some days he came home not wearing any socks. Other times he was shirtless and ran up the stairs before our mother caught him. He brushed his teeth and washed his face and came down, fully dressed, a little starry-eyed, not quite drunk enough to get caught.

"Where were you?"

"God's work."

"And is God's work not looking after your mother?" She adjusted his shirt collar as she sat down to dinner.

After a while with the down-and-outs he began to fit in, slipped into the background, melded in among them. He walked with them to the flophouse on Rutland Street and sat slumped up against the wall. Corrigan listened to their stories: long, rambling tales that seemed rooted in a different Ireland altogether. It was an apprenticeship for him: he crept in on their poverty as if he wanted to own it. He drank. He smoked. He never mentioned our father, not to me or anyone else. But he was there, our gone father, I could tell. Corrigan would either drown him in sherry or spit him away like a fleck of tobacco from his tongue.

The week he turned fourteen my mother sent me to pick him up: he'd been gone all day and she'd baked a cake for him. An evening drizzle fell over Dublin. A horsecart went past, the light from its dynamo shining. I watched it clp away down the street, the pinpoint of light spreading. I hated the city at times like that—it had no desire to get out from under its gryness. I walked past the bed-and-breakfast houses, the antique shops, the candle makers, the suppliers of liturgical medals. The flophouse was marked by a black gate, ironwork sharpened to points. I went to the back, where the bins were kept. Rain dripped from a broken pipe. I stepped over a pile of crates and cardboard boxes, shouting his name. When I found him, he was so drunk that he couldn't stand. I grabbed his arm. "Hi," he said, smiling. He fell against the wall and cut his hand. He stood staring at his palm. The blood ran down his wrist. One of the younger drunks—a teddy boy in a red T-shirt—spat at him. It was the only time I ever saw Corrigan throw a punch. It missed completely but blood from his hand flew, and I knew—even while I watched it—that it was a moment I would never forget. Corrigan swinging in midair, droplets of his blood spraying the wall.

"I'm a pacifist," he said, slurring his words.

I walked him all the way along the Liffey, past the coal ships and into Ringsend, where I washed him with water from the old hand pump on Irishtown Road. He took my face in his hands. "Thank you, thank you." He began to cry as we got to Beach Road, which led towards our house. A deep dark had fallen over the sea. Rain dripped from the roadside palms. I hauled him back from the sand. "I'm soft," he said. He wiped his sleeve across his eyes, lit a cigarette, coughed until he threw up.

At the gate of the house, he looked up to the light in our mother's bedroom. "Is she awake?"

He minced his steps up the driveway but once inside he charged up the stairs, ran into her arms. She smelled the drink and tobacco off him, of course, but didn't say anything. She ran a bath for him, sat outside the door. Silent at first, she let her feet stretch across the landing, then laid her head against the doorjamb and sighed: it was as if she too were in a bath, stretching out towards days yet to be remembered.

He put on his clothes, stepped out into the landing, and she towed his hair dry.

"You won't drink again, will you, love?"

He shook his head no.

"A curfew on Fridays. Home by five. You hear me?"

"Fair enough."

"Promise me now."

"Cross my heart and hope to die."

His eyes were bloodshot.

She kissed his hair and held him close. "There's a cake downstairs for you, love."

Corrigan took two weeks off from his Friday jaunts, but soon began to meet the drunks again. It was a ritual he couldn't give up. The down-and-outs needed him, or at least wanted him—he was, to them, a mad, impossible angel. He still drank with them, but only on special days. Mostly
he was sober. He had this idea that the men were really looking for some
type of Eden and that when they drank they returned to it, but, on getting
there, they weren't able to stay. He didn't try to convince them to stop.
That wasn't his way.

It might've been easy for me not to like Corrigan, my younger brother
who sparked people alive, but there was something about him that made
dislike difficult. His theme was happiness—what it is and what it might
not have been, where he might find it and where it might have disappear-
red.

I was nineteen, and Corrigan was seventeen, when our mother died.
A short, quick struggle with kidney cancer. The last thing she told us was
to take care to close the curtains so the light didn't fade the living room

She was taken to St. Vincent's Hospital on the first day of summer. The
ambulance left wet tracks along the sea road. Corrigan cycled furiously
after it. She was put in a long ward full of sick patients. We got her a pri-

tate room and filled it with flowers. We took turns sitting at her bedside,
combing her hair, long and brittle to the touch. Clumps of it came out in
the comb. For the first time ever she had a jilted air about her: her body
was betraying her. The bedside ashtray filled with hair. I clung to the idea
that if we kept her long gray strands we could get back to the way we once
were. It was all I could manage. She lasted three months, then passed on
a September day when everything seemed split open with sunlight.

We sat in the room waiting for the nurses to appear and take her body
away. Corrigan was in the middle of a long prayer when a shadow ap-
peared in the hospital doorway.

"Hello, boys."

Our father had an English accent on his grief. I hadn't seen him since
I was three years old. A stringpiece of light fell on him. He was pale and
hunched. There was a smattering of hair across his scalp, but his eyes
were a pellucid blue. He took off his hat and put it to his chest. "Sorry,
lads."

I went across to shake his hand. It startled me that I was taller than
him. He gripped my shoulder and squeezed.

Corrigan remained silent, in the corner.

"Shake my hand, son," our father said.

"How did you know she was sick?"
long silence. I lay back against the pillow, allowed the quiet to surround me. Footsteps on the stairs. The creak at the top step. The noises were full of mystery. Corrigan rumbled through the downstairs cupboards and slammed the front door.

When I went to the window I saw a line of well-dressed men on the strand, right outside our house. They were wearing our father's old suits and hats and scarves. One had tucked a red handkerchief in the breast pocket of the black suit. Another carried a pair of polished shoes in his hand. Corrigan went among them, a little lopsided, his hand jammed down into his trouser pocket, where he was holding a bottle. He was shirless and wild-looking. A head of uncombed hair. His arms and neck were brown, but the rest of his body was pale. He grinned and waved at my father standing now at the front door, barefoot, stunned, watching a dozen copies of himself out walking the tidal sands.

A couple of women I recognized from the charity lines at the flophouses were sauntering along the mucky sand in my mother's old summer dresses, celebrating their new clothes.

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Corrigan told me once that Christ was quite easy to understand. He went where He was supposed to go. He stayed where He was needed. He took little or nothing along, a pair of sandals, a bit of a shirt, a few odds and ends to stave off the loneliness. He never rejected the world. If He had rejected it, He would have been rejecting mystery. And if He rejected mystery, He would have been rejecting faith.

What Corrigan wanted was a fully believable God, one you could find in the grime of the everyday. The comfort he got from the hard, cold truth—the filth, the war, the poverty—was that life could be capable of small beauties. He wasn't interested in the glorious tales of the afterlife or the notions of a honey-soaked heaven. To him that was a dressing room for hell. Rather he consolde himself with the fact that, in the real world, when he looked closely into the darkness he might find the presence of a light, damaged and bruised, but a little light all the same. He wanted, quite simply, for the world to be a better place, and he was in the habit of hoping for it. Out of that came some sort of triumph that went beyond theological proof, a cause for optimism against all the evidence.

"Someday the meek might actually want it," he said.

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After our mother died, we sold the house. Our father took half the money. Corrigan gave his portion away. He lived off the charity of others and began studying the work of Francis of Assisi. For hours on end he would walk the city, reading. He made himself sandals out of some scrap leather and wore wild-colored socks underneath. He became a staple on the streets of Dublin in the mid-sixties, with stringy hair and carpenter pants, books tucked under his arm. He had a long, shambling stride. He went around penniless, coatless, shirtless. Every August, on the anniversary of Hiroshima, he locked himself to the gates of the Parliament on Kildare Street, a quiet vigil for one night, no photos, no journalists, just him and his cardboard box spread out on the ground.

When he was nineteen he began studying with the Jesuits at Emo College. Mass in the early dawn. Hours of theological study. Afternoon walks through the fields. Night walks along the Barrow River, beseeching his God out under the stars. The morning prayers, the noontime prayers, the evening prayers, the complines. The glorias, the psalms, the gospel readings. They gave a rigor to his faith, it staked him to a purpose. Still, the hills of Laois couldn't hold him. He couldn't be an ordinary priest—it wasn't the life for him; he was ill defined for it, he needed more space for his doubt. He left the novitiate and went to Brussels, where he joined a group of young monks who took their vows of chastity, poverty, obedience. He lived in a small flat in the center of the city. Grew his hair out. Kept his head in books: Augustine, Eckhart, Massignon, Charles de Foucauld. It was a life of ordinary labor, friendship, solidarity. He drove a fruit truck for a local cooperative and organized a labor union for a small group of workers. In his work he wore no religious garments, or collars, carried no Bible, and preferred to stay quiet, even around the brothers of his own Order.

Few of the people who came across him ever knew of his religious ties and, even in those places where he spent the longest, he was seldom known for his beliefs—instead, people looked at him with a fondness for another era, when time seemed slower, less complicated. Even the worst of what men did to one another didn't dampen Corrigan's beliefs. He might have been naïve, but he didn't care; he said he'd rather die with his heart on his sleeve than end up another cynic.

The only furniture he owned was his oak-wood prayer kneeler and his bookshelves. The shelves were lined with a number of religious poets,
At the hospital the police went through my pockets to look for identification. I was arrested for possession and brought to the courthouse, where the judge took pity and said it was a wrongful search, gave me a lecture, and sent me on my way. I went straight to a travel agency on Dawson Street, bought my ticket out.

I came through John F. Kennedy Airport in a long necklace and an Afghan coat, carrying a torn copy of Howl. The customs men sniggered. The cloth latch on my rucksack snapped when I tried to put it together again.

I stood looking around for Corrigan—he had promised, in a postcard, that he'd meet me. It was eighty-seven degrees in the shade. The heat hit me with the force of an ax. The waiting area pulsed. Families roamed about, pushing past one another to get at flight information. Taxi drivers had a shiny menace to them. No sign of my brother anywhere. I sat on my rucksack for an hour until a policeman with a billy club prodded me and knocked the book out of my hands.

I boarded a bus amid the swelter and noise. Later on the subway I loitered beneath the whirling fan. A black woman stood beside me, fanning herself with a magazine. Ovals of sweat at her underarms. I had never seen a black woman so close before, her skin so dark it was almost blue. I wanted to touch it, just press her forearm with my finger. She caught my eye and pulled her blouse tight: "Whatcha lookin' at?"

"Ireland," I blurted. "I'm Irish."

A moment later she glanced at me again. "No kiddin'," she said. She got off at 125th Street, where the train screeched to a halt.

It was nightfall by the time I reached the Bronx. I stepped out of the station to the late beat. Gray brick and billboards. A rhythmic sound came from a radio player. A kid in a sleeveless shirt spun on a piece of cardboard, his shoulder somehow a fulcrum for his whole body. A loosening of contour. No limits. Hands to the ground, his feet whipped out a long extended circle. He went low and suddenly spun on his head, then arced backwards, unsprung, and dropped into the air, pureness moving.

Some gypsy cabs idled on the Concourse. Old white men in wide hats. I flung my rucksack into the boot of a giant black car.

"Ants in their pants, man," said the driver as he leaned over the seat. "You think that kid's gonna go anywhere? After spinning on his goddamn head?"
I gave him Corrigan’s address on a slip of paper. He grunted something about power steering, said they never had it in ‘Nam.

After half an hour we pulled sharply into the curve. We had been driving in elaborate circles. “Twelve bucks, bud.” No point in arguing. I threw the money over the seat, got out, grabbed my rucksack. The driver of the cab pulled off before I got a chance to close the boot. I clutched my copy of Howl to my chest. I saw the best minds of my generation. The lid of the taxi bounced and slammed shut when the driver turned sharply by the traffic lights and away.

On one side was a row of high-rise tenements behind a chain-link fence. Parts of the fence were topped with razor wire. On the other, the expressway: the light-streak of cars zipping above. Below, by the underpass, a long line of women. Cars and trucks were pulling into the shadows. The women stuck poses. They wore hotpants and bikini tops and swimsuits, a bizarre city beach. An angled arm, in the shadowlight, reached the top of the expressway. A stiletto climbed to the top of a barbed-wire fence. A leg stretched half the length of a city block.

Nighthawks flew out from under the highway girders, momentarily intent on the sky, but then swooped back into hiding.

A woman emerged from under the girders. She wore a fur coat open at the shoulders and spread her knee-high boots wide. A car went by and she threw open the coat. Underneath she wore nothing at all. The car beeped and sped off. She screamed after it, started walking my way, carrying what looked like a parasol.

I scanned the balconies of the high-rises for any sign of Corrigan. The street lights flickered. A plastic bag tumbled. Some shoes were strung on the high telegraph wire.

“Hey, honey.”

“I’m broke,” I said without turning around. The hooker spat thickly at my feet and raised the pink parasol over her head.

“Asshole,” she said as she walked past.

She stood on the lid side of the street and waited underneath the parasol. Every time a car went past she lowered and raised it, making herself into a little planet of light and dark.

I carried my rucksack towards the projects with as much nonchalance as I could. Heroin needles lay along the inside of the fence, among the weeds. Someone had spray-painted the sign near the entrance to the flats. A few old men sat outside the lobby, fanning themselves in the heat. They looked ruined and decrepit, the sort of men who’d soon turn into empty chairs. One of them reached for the slip of paper with my brother’s address written on it, shook his head, sagged back.

A kid ran past, a metallic sound coming from him, a tinny bounce. He disappeared into the darkness of a stairwell. The smell of fresh paint drifted from him.

I turned the corner to another corner; it was all corners.

Corrigan’s place was in a gray block of flats. The fifth floor of twenty. A little sticker by the doorbell: PEACE AND JUSTICE in a crown of thorns. Five locks on the doorframe. None of them worked. I pushed the door open. It swung and banged. A little bit of white plaster fell from the wall. I called his name. The place was bare but for a torn sofa, a low table, a simple wooden crucifix over the single wooden bed. His prayer kneeler faced against the wall. Books lay on the floor, open, as if speaking to one another: Thomas Merton, Rubem Alves, Dorothy Day.

I stepped over to the sofa, exhausted.

I woke later to the parasol hooker slamming through the doorway. She stood mopping her brow, then threw her handbag on the sofa beside me. “Oops, sorry, honey,” she said. I turned my face so she wouldn’t recognize me. She walked across the room, hitching off her fur coat as she went, naked but for her boots. She stopped a moment, looked in a long slice of broken mirror propped against the wall. Her calf muscles were smooth and curved. She hitched the flesh of her bottom, sighed, then stretched and rubbed her nipples full. "Goddamn," she said. The sound of running water came from the bathroom.

The hooker emerged with her lipstick bright and a new clack in her step. The sharp smell of perfume filled the air. She blew me a kiss, waved the parasol, left.

It happened five or six times in a row. The turn of the door handle. The ping of stilettoes on the bare floorboards. A different hooker each time. One even leaned down and let her long thin breasts hang in my face. "College boy," she said like an offer. I shook my head and she said curtly: "I thought so." She turned at the door and smiled. "There’ll be lawyers in heaven before you see somethin’ so good again."
She went down the corridor, laughing.
In the bathroom was a small metal rubbish can. Tampons and sad polyps of used condoms wrapped in tissue.
Corrigan woke me later that night. I had no idea what time it was. He wore the same type of thin shirt he had for years: black, collarless, long-sleeved, with wooden buttons. He was thin, as if the sheer volume of the poor had worn him wayward to his old self. His hair was shoulder length and he had grown out his sideburns, a little punch of gray already at his temples. His face was cut slightly, and his right eye bruised. He looked older than thirty-one.
"Beautiful world you’re living in, Corrigan."
"Did you bring tea?"
"What happened you? Your cheek? It’s cut."
"Tell me you at least brought a few tea bags, brother?"
I opened the rucksack. Five boxes of his favorite. He kissed my forehead. His lips were dry. His stubble stung.
"Who beat you up, Corrigan?"
"Don’t worry about me—let me see you."
He reached up and touched my right ear, where the tip of the lobe was gone.
"You all right?"
"It’s a memento, I suppose. You still a pacifist?"
"Still,” he said with a grin. “You’ve got nice friends.”
“They just need to use the bathroom. They’re not allowed turn tricks. They weren’t turning tricks in here, were they?"
“They were naked, Corrigan."
“No they weren’t."
“I’m telling you, man, they were naked.”
“They don’t like cumbersome clothes," he said with a little laugh. He palmed my shoulder, pushed me back on the couch. "Anyway, they must’ve been wearing shoes. It’s New York. You have to have good stilettos."
He put the kettle on, lined up the cups.
“My very serious brother, he said, but his chuckle died away as he turned the flame on the stove high. “Look, man, they’re desperate. I just want to give them a little spot that they can call their own. Get out of the heat. Splash some water on their faces.” His back was turned. I was reminded of how, years before, he had drifted away from one of our afternoon strolls and got surrounded by the tide—Corrigan, isolated on a sandbar, tangled in light, voices from the shore drifting over him, calling his name. The kettle whistled, louder now and shrill. Even from the back he looked like he’d been knocked around. I said his name, once, twice. On the third time he snapped to, turned, smiled. It was almost the same as when he’d been a child—he looked up, waved, and returned waist-high through the water.
"On your own here, Corrigan?"
"Just for a while."
"No Brothers? No others with you?"
"Oh, I’m getting to know the immemorial feelings,“ he said. "The hunger, the thirst, being tired at the end of the day. I’ve started wondering if God’s around when I wake up in the middle of the night.”
He seemed to be talking to a point over my shoulder. His eyes were deep and pouty. "That’s what I like about God. You get to know Him by His occasional absence.
"You all right, Corrigan?"
"Never better."
"So who beat you up?"
He looked away. "I had a run-in with one of the pimps."
Why?"
"Because."
"Because why, man?"
"Because he claimed I was taking up their time. Guy calls himself Birdhouse. Only got one good eye. Go figure. In he came, knocked on the door, said hello, called me brother this, brother that, real nice and polite, even hung his hat on the doorknob. Sat down on the sofa and looked up at the crucifix. Said he had a real appreciation for the holy life. Then produced a length of lead pipe that he’d ripped from the toilet. Imagine that. He’d been sitting there all that time, just letting my bathroom flood." He shrugged.
"But they still come around," he said. "The girls. I don’t encourage it, really. I mean, what are they going to do? Pee on the street? It’s not much. Just a little gesture. A place they can use. A tinkling shop."
He arranged the tea and a plate of biscuits, went to his prayer kneeler—a simple piece of wood that he tucked behind him to support
his body as he knelt—and gave his thanks to God for the biscuits, the tea, the appearance of his brother.

He was still praying when the door swung hard and in marched three hookers. “Ooh, snowing in here,” cooed the parasol hooker as she stood under the fan. “Hi, I’m Tillie.” The heat oozed from her: little droplets of sweat on her forehead. She dropped her parasol on the table, looked at me with a half-grin. She was made up to be seen from a distance: she wore huge sunglasses with rose-colored rims and sparkly eye makeup. Another girl kissed Corrigan on the cheek, then started primping in the broken slice of mirror. The tallest, in a white tissue minidress, sat down beside me. She looked half Mexican, half black. She was taut and lithe: she could have been walking down a runway. “Hi,” she said, grinning. “I’m Jazzlyn. You can call me Jazz.”

She was very young—seventeen or eighteen—with one green eye, one brown. Her cheekbones were pulled even higher by a line of makeup. She reached across, lifted Corrigan’s teacup, blew it cool, left a smudge of lipstick on the rim.

“I don’t know why you don’t put ice in this shit, Corrie,” she said.

“Don’t like it,” said Corrigan.

“If you wanna be American you gotta put ice in it.”

The parasol hooker giggled then as if Jazzlyn had just said something fabulously rude. It was like they had a code going between them. I edged away, but Jazzlyn leaned across and picked a piece of lint off my shoulder. Her breath was sweet. I turned again to Corrigan.

“Did you get him arrested?”

My brother looked confused. “Who?” he said.

“The bloke who beat you up?”

“Arrested for what?”

“Are you serious?”

“Why would I get him arrested?”

“Did someone beat you up again, honey?” said the parasol hooker. She was staring at her fingers. She bit a long edge of fingernail from her thumb, examined the little slice. She scraped the fingernail paint off with her teeth, and flicked the slice of nail towards me from off her extended finger. I stared at her. She flashed a white grin. “I can’t stand it when I get beaten up,” she said.

“Jesus,” I muttered to the window.

“Enough,” said Corrigan.

“They always leave marks, don’t they?” said Jazzlyn.

“Okay, Jazz, enough, okay?”

“Once, this guy, this asshole, this quadruple motherfucker, he used a telephone book on me. You want to know something about the telephone book? Lots of names and not one of them leaves a mark.”

Jazzlyn stood up and removed her loose blouse. She wore a neon-yellow bikini underneath. “He hit me here and here and here.”

“Okay, Jazz, time to go.”

“I bet you could find your own name here.”

“Jazzlyn!”

She stood and sighed. “Your brother’s cute,” she said to me. She buttoned her blouse. “We love him like chocolate. We love him like nicotine. Isn’t that right, Corrie? We love you like nicotine. Tillie’s got a crush on him. Ain’t you, Tillie? Tillie, you listening?”

The parasol hooker stepped away from the mirror. She touched the edge of her mouth where the lipstick smeared. "Too old to be an acrobat, too young to die," she said.

Jazzlyn was fumbling under the table with a small glassine package. Corrigan leaned across and touched her hand. "Not here, you know you can’t do that in here." She rolled her eyes, sighed, and dropped a needle in her handbag.

The door bounced on its hinges. All of them blew kisses, even Jazzlyn, with her back turned. She looked like some failed sunflower, her arm curving backwards as she went.

"Poor Jazz."

"What a mess."

"Well, at least she’s trying."

"Trying? She’s a mess. They all are."

"Ah, no, they’re good people," Corrigan said. "They just don’t know what it is they’re doing. Or what’s being done to them. It’s about fear. You know? They’re all shivering with fear. We all are."

He drank the tea without cleaning the lipstick off the rim.

"Bits of it floating in the air," he said. "It’s like dust. You walk about and don’t see it, don’t notice it, but it’s there and it’s all coming down, covering everything. You’re breathing it in. You touch it. You drink it. You eat it. But it’s so fine you don’t notice it. But you’re covered in it. It’s ev-
everywhere. What I mean is, we're afraid. Just stand still for an instant and there it is, this fear, covering our faces and tongues. If we stopped to take account of it, we'd just fall into despair. But we can't stop. We've got to keep going.

"For what?"

"I don't know—that's my problem."

"What are you into here, Corr?"

"I suppose I have to put flesh on my words, y'know. But sometimes that's my dilemma too, man. I'm supposed to be a man of God but I hardly ever mention Him to anyone. Not to the girls, even. I keep these thoughts to myself. For my own peace of mind. The ease of my conscience. If I started thinking them out loud all the time I think I'd go mad. But God listens back. Most of the time. He does."

He drained the teacup and cleaned the rim with the flap of his shirt.

"But these girls, man. Sometimes I think they're better believers than me. At least they're open to the faith of a rolled-down window."

Corrigan turned the teacup upside down onto his palm, balanced it there.

"You missed the funeral," I said.

A little dribble of tea sat in his palm. He brought his hand to his mouth and tongued it.

Our father had died a few months before. In the middle of his university classroom, a lecture about quarks. Elementary particles. He had insisted on finishing his class while a pain shot down his left arm. Three quarks for Muser Mark. Thank you, class. Safe home. Good night. Bye-bye. I was hardly devastated, but I had left Corrigan dozens of messages, and even got through to the Bronx police, but they said there was nothing they could do.

In the graveyard I had kept turning, hoping to see him coming up the narrow lane, maybe even in one of our father's old suits, but he never appeared.

"Not too many people there," I said. "Small English churchyard. A man cutting the grass. Didn't turn the engine off for the service."

He kept tilting the teacup on his hand, as if trying to get the last drops out.

"What scriptures did they use?" he said finally.

"I can't remember. Sorry. Why?"

"Doesn't matter."

"What would you have used, Corr?"

"Oh, I don't know, really. Something Old Testament, maybe. Something primal."

"Like what, Corr?"

"Not sure exactly."

"Go on, tell me."

"I don't know!" he shouted. "Okay? I don't fucking know!"

The curse stunned me. The curse flushed him red. He lowered his gaze, scrubbed the cup with the flap of his shirt. The sound of it made a high, unusual squeak and I knew then that there'd be no more talk about our father. He had closed that path down, quick and hard, made a border; don't cross here. It pleased me a little to think that he had a flaw and that it went so deep that he couldn't deal with it. Corrigan wanted other people's pain. He didn't want to deal with his own. I felt a pulse of shame too, for thinking that way.

The silence of brothers.

He tucked the prayer kneeler at the back of his knees, like a wooden cushion, and he began mumbling.

When he stood he said: "Sorry for cursing."

"Yeah, me too."

At the window, he absently pulled the cord of the blinds open and shut. Down below, a woman by the underpass screamed. He parted the window blind again, with two fingers.

"Sounds like Jazz," he said.

The orange streetlight from the window latticed him as he crossed the floor at a clip.

HOURS AND HOURS of insanity and escape. The projects were a victim of theft and wind. The downdrafts made their own weather. Plastic bags caught on the gusts of summer wind. Old domino players sat in the courtyard, playing underneath the flying litter. The sound of the plastic bags was like rattle fire. If you watched the rubbish for a while you could tell the exact shape of the wind. Perhaps in a way it was alluring, like little else around it: whole, bright, slapping curlicues and large figure eights, helixes and whoils and corkscrews. Sometimes a bit of plastic
caught against a pipe or touched the top of the chain-link fence and backed away gracelessly, like it had been warned. The handles came together and the bag collapsed. There were no tree branches to be caught on. One boy from a neighboring flat stuck a lineless fishing pole out the window but he didn't catch any. The bags often stayed up in one place, as if they were contemplating the whole gray scene, and then they would take a sudden dip, a polite curtsy, and away.

I'd fooled myself into thinking I'd some poems in me while I was in Dublin. It was like hanging old clothes out to dry. Everyone in Dublin was a poet, maybe even the bombers who'd treated us to their afternoon of delight.

I'd been in the South Bronx a week. It was so humid, some nights, we had to shoulder the door closed. Kids on the tenth floor aimed television sets at the housing cops who patrolled below. Air mail. The police came in, clubbing. Shots rang out from the rooftop. On the radio there was a song about the revolution being ghettoized. Arson on the streets. It was a city with its fingers in the garbage, a city that ate off dirty dishes. I had to get out. The plan was to look for a job, get my own little place, maybe work on a play, or get a job on a paper somewhere. There were ads in the circulars for bartenders and waiters, but I didn't want to go that way, all flat hats and micks in shirtsleeves. I found a gig as a telemarketer but I needed a dedicated phone line in Corrigan's apartment, and it was impossible to get a technician to visit the housing complex: this was not the America I had expected.

Corrigan wrote out a list of things for me to see, Chunley's bar in the Village, the Brooklyn Bridge, Central Park by day. But I had little money to speak of. I went to the window and watched the plot of the days unfold. The rubbish accused me. Already the smell rose up to the fifth-floor windows.

Corrigan worked as part of his Order's ethic, made a few bob by driving a van for some old folk in the local nursing home. The bumper was tied with rusted wire. The windows were plastered with his peace stickers. The front headlights hung loose in the grille. He was gone most of the day, in charge of the ones that were infirm. What was ordeal for others was grace for him. He picked them up in the late morning in the nursing home on Cypress Avenue—mostly Irish, Italian, one old Jewish man, nicknamed Albee, in a gray suit and skullcap. "Short for Albert," he said, "but if you call me Albert I'll kick your ass." I sat in with them a few afternoons, men and women—most of them white—who could have been folded up just like their wheelchairs. Corrigan drove at a snail's pace so as not to bounce them around. "You drive like a pussy," said Albee from the backseat. Corrigan laid his head against the steering wheel and laughed, but kept his foot on the brake.

Cars behind us beeped. A hellish ruckus of horns. The air was stifled with ruin. "Move it, man, move it!" Albee shouted. "Move the goddamn van!"

Corrigan took his foot off the brake and slowly guided the van around to the playground at St. Mary's, where he wheeled the old folk out into whatever bits of shade he could find. "Fresh air," he said. The men sat rooted like Larkin poems. The old women looked shaken, heads nodding in the breeze, watching the playground. It was mostly black or Hispanic kids, zooming down the slides or swinging on the monkey bars.

Albee managed to wheel himself into the corner, where he took out sheets of paper. He bent over them and said not another word, scratching on the paper with a pencil. I hunkered down beside him.

"What you doing there, friend?"
"None of your goddamn business."
"Chess, is it?"
"You play?"
"Right on."
"You rated?"
"Rated?"
"Oh, get the fuck outa here—you're a pussy too."

Corrigan winked at me from the edge of the playground. This was his world and he plainly loved it.

Lunch had been made for them in the old folks' home, but Corrigan went across the road to the local bodega to buy them extra potato crisps, cigarettes, a cold beer for Albee. A yellow awning. A bubblegum machine sat triple-chained to the shutters. A dustbin was overturned at the corner. There had been a garbage strike earlier that spring and still it wasn't all cleaned up. Rats ran along the street gutters. Young men in sleeveless tops stood malevolently in the doorways. They knew Corrigan, it seemed,
and as he disappeared inside he gave them a series of elaborate handshakes. He spent a long time inside and came out clutching large brown paper bags. One of the hoodlums back slapped him, grabbed his hand, drew him close.

"How d'you do that?" I asked. "How d'you get them to talk to you?"

"Why wouldn't they?"

"It just seems, I don't know, they're tough, they know."

"As far as they're concerned, I'm just a square."

"You're not worried? You know, a gun, or something, a switchblade?"

"Why would I be?"

Together we loaded the old folk up in the van. He revved the engine and drove to the church. There had been a woe among the old folk, the church as opposed to the synagogue. It was daubed in graffiti—whites, yellows, reds, silvers. Tags 173, GRAC 76. The stained-glass windows had been broken with small stones. Even the cross on top was tagged. "The living temple," said Corrigan. The elderly Jewish man refused to get out. He sat, head down, saying nothing, skipping through the notes in his book. Corrigan opened the back of the van and slipped him an extra beer over the seat.

"He's all right, our Albee," said Corrigan as he strolled away from the back of the van. "All he does is work on those chess problems all day long. Used to be a grandmaster or something. Came from Hungary, found himself in the Bronx. He sends his games off in the post somewhere. Does about twenty games all at once. He can play blindfolded. It's the only thing that keeps him going."

He helped the others out of the van and wheeled them one by one towards the entrance. "Let's walk the plank." There were a series of broken steps at the front but Corrigan had stashed two long pieces of wood around the side, near the sacristy. He laid the planks parallel to each other and guided the chairs up. The wood filled in the air with the weight of the wheelchairs, and for a moment they looked like they were bound for the sky. Corrigan pushed them forward and the planks snapped back down. He had the look of a man at ease. A shine in the corners of his eyes. You could see the gone boy in him, the nine-year-old back in Sandy-mountain.

He left the old folk waiting by the holy-water font, until they were all lined up, ready to go.

"My favorite moment of the day, this," he said. He crossed over into the cool dark of the church, rolled them to whatever spot they wanted, some in the rear pews, some to the sides.

An old Irish woman was brought up to the very front, where she wrapped and rewrapped her rosary beads. She had a mane of white hair, blood in the corner of her eyes, an otherworldly stare. "Meet Sheila," said Corrigan. She could hardly speak anymore, barely able to make a sound. A cabaret singer, she had lost most of her voice to throat cancer. She had been born in Galway but emigrated just after the First World War. She was Corrigan's favorite and he stayed near her, said the formal prayers alongside her: a decade of the Rosary. She had no idea, I'm sure, about his religious ties, but there was an energy about her in that church she didn't have elsewhere. She and Corrigan, it was like they were praying together for a good rain.

When we got out into the street again, Albee was dozing in the van, a bit of spittle on his chin. "Goddamn it," he muttered when the engine rumbled into life. "Pair of pussies, the two of ya."

Corrigan pulled into the nursing home in the late afternoon, then dropped me off in front of the housing project. He had another job to do, he said; there was someone he had to see.

"It's a little project I'm working on," he said, over his shoulder. "Nothing to worry about. I'll see you later."

He climbed in and touched something in the glove box of his van before he took off. "Don't wait up for me," he called. I watched him go, hand out the window, waving. He was holding something back, I knew.

It was pitch black when I saw him finally arriving back down among the whores alongside the Major Deegan. He gave out iced coffee from a giant silver canister that he kept in the back of the van. The girls gathered around him as he spooned ice into their cups. Jazzlyn wore a one-piece neon swimsuit. She tugged the back, snapped the elastic, edged close to him, gave the hint of a belly dance against his hip. She was tall, exotic, so very young she seemed to flutter. Playfully she pushed him backwards. Corrigan ran a circle around her, high-stepping. A scream of laughter. She ran off when she heard a car horn blow. Around Corrigan's feet lay a row of empty paper coffee cups.

Later he came back upstairs, thin, dark-eyed, exhausted.

"How was your meeting?"
“Oh, grand, yeah,” he said. “No problem.”

“Out tripping the light fantastic?”

“Ah, yeah, the Copacabana, you know me.”

He collapsed on the bed but was up early in the morning to a quick mug of tea. No food in the house. Just tea and sugar and milk. He said his prayers, and then touched the crucifix as he went towards the door once more.

“Down to the girls again?”

He looked at his feet. “I suppose so.”

“You think they really need you, Corr?”

“Don’t know,” he said. “I hope so.”

The door swung on its hinges.

I’ve never been interested in calling out the moral brigade. Not my place. Not my job. Each to his own. You get what you create. Corrigan had his reasons. But these women disturbed me. They were light-years removed from anything I’d ever known. The high of their eyes. Their heroin sway. Their swimsuits. Some of them had needle marks at the back of their knees. They were more than foreign to me.

Down in the courtyard, I walked the long way around the projects, following the broken lines in the concrete, just to avoid them.

A few days later a gentle knock sounded on the door. An older man with a single suitcase. Another monk from the Order. Corrigan rushed to embrace him. “Brother Norbert.” He had come from Switzerland. Norbert’s sad brown eyes gladdened me. He looked around the apartment, swallowed deeply, said something about the Lord Jesus and a place of deep shelter. On his second day Norbert was robbed in the lift at gunpoint. He said he had gladly given them everything, even his passport. There was a shine like pride in his eyes. The Swiss man sat in serious prayer for two solid days, not leaving the apartment. Corrigan stayed down on the streets most of the time. Norbert was too formal and correct for him. “It’s like he’s got a toothache and he wants God to cure it,” said Corrigan.

Norbert refused the couch, lay on the floor. He barked each time the door opened and the hookers came in. Jazlyn sat in his lap, ran her fingers on the rim of his ear, messed with his orthopedic shoes, hid them behind the couch. She told him that she could be his princess. He blushed until he almost wept. Later, when she was gone, his prayers became high-pitched and frantic. “The Beloved Life was spared, but not the pain, the Beloved Life was spared but not the pain.” He broke down in tears. Corrigan was able to get Norbert’s passport back and he drove him out to the airport in the brown van to get a flight to Geneva. Together they prayed and then Corrigan dispatched him. He looked at me as if he expected me to be leaving also.

“I don’t know who these people are,” he said. “They’re my brothers, but I don’t really know who they are. I’ve failed them.”

“You should leave this hole, Corr.”

“Why would I leave? My life’s here.”

“Find somewhere with a bit of sunshine. You and me together. I’ve been thinking about California or somewhere like that.”

“I’m called here.”

“You could be called anywhere.”

“This is where I am.”

“How did you get his passport back?”

“Oh, I just asked around.”

“He was robbed at gunpoint, Corr.”

“I know.”

“You’re going to get hurt.”

“Oh, give me a break.”

I went to the chair by the window and watched the large tractor-trailers pulling up under the highway. The girls jostled to get at them. A single neon sign blinked in the distance: an advertisement for oatmeal.

“The edge of the world here,” said Corrigan.


“I could, yeah.”

“Or shake up some campesinos in Brazil or something.”

“Yeah.”

“So why stay here?”

He smiled. Something had gone wild in his eyes. I couldn’t tell what it was. He put his hands up close to the ceiling fan, as if he were about to thrust them in there. Right up into the whirling blades, leave his hands there, watch them get mangled.
IN THE RAW of mornings the girls stretched in a line along the block, though daylight thinned them out. After his morning matins, Corrigan went down to the corner deli to buy The Catholic Worker. Through the underpass, across the road, under the awning. Old men in their undershirts sat at the door, pigeons working bread crumbs at their feet. Corrigan came out carrying the paper tucked under his arm. I could see him as he crossed back, framed through the concrete eye of the underpass. Out of the shadows, he passed the hookers and they called to him in their singsong. It hit the scale on about three different notes. Cor—i-gan. Cor—i-gan. Caw-rig-gun.

He passed through the gauntlet. Jazzlyn stood chatting with him, her thumb hooked under the strap of her swimsuit. She looked like an old-time cop in the wrong body, snapping the thin, lime-colored straps against her breasts. She leaned close to him again, her bare skin almost touching his lapel. He did not recoil. She was getting a charge from it all, I could tell. The lean of her young body. The hard snap of the strap. Her nipple against the fabric. Her head tilting closer and closer to him.

As cars passed, she turned to watch them, and her morning shadow lengthened. It was like she wanted to be everywhere, all at once. She leaned closer still and whispered in my brother’s ear. He nodded, turned, and went back towards the deli, came out carrying a can of Coke. Jazzlyn clapped her hands in delight, took it from him, pulled the ring off, summoned away. A row of eighteen-wheelers was parked along the expressway. She propped her leg on the silver grille and sipped from the can, then suddenly threw the drink on the ground and climbed up into the truck.

Halfway in the door, she was already removing her swimsuit. Corrigan turned away. The cola lay in a black puddle in the gutter beneath her.

It happened times in a row, Jazzlyn asking him for a can of Coke, then throwing it to the ground when she found a mark.

I thought I should go down to her, negotiate a price, and treat myself to whatever trick it was she was able for, grab the back of her hair, bring her face close to mine, that sweet breath, curse her, spit on her, for wringing out my brother’s charity.

"Hey, leave the door open for them, will ya?" he said to me after he came home. I had taken to closing the locks in the afternoon, even though they pounded on the door.

"Why don’t they piss in their own houses, Corrigan?"

"Because they don’t have houses. They have apartments."

"Why don’t they piss in their own apartments then?"

"Because they’ve got families. Mothers and fathers and brothers and sons and daughters. They don’t want their families to see them dressed like that."

"They’ve got kids?"

"Sure."

"Jazz, she got kids?"

"Two," he said.

"Oh, man."

"Tillie’s her mother."

I turned on him. I knew how it sounded. Step into that river, you don’t step out—no return. It came out in a torrent, how disgusting they were, sucking on his blood, all of them, leaving him thin, dry, helpless, taking the life out of him, leeches, worse than leeches, bedbugs that crawled from the wallpaper; he was a fool—all his religiosity, all his pious horseshit, it came down to nothing, the world is vicious and that’s what it amounts to, and hope is nothing more or less than what you can see with your own bare eyes.

He pulled at a small thread on the sleeve of his shirt, but I caught his elbow.

"Don’t give me your shit about the Lord upholding all that fall and raising up all that be bowed down. The Lord’s too big to fit in their miniskirts. Guess what, brother? Look at them. Look out the window. No amount of sympathy is ever going to change it. Why don’t you cop on? You’re just placating your conscience, that’s all. God comes along and sanctifies your guilt."

His lips broke open a little. I waited but still he did not speak. We were so close together I could see his tongue move behind his teeth, flicking up and down like something nervous. His eyes were fixed and intent.

"Grow up, brother. Pack your bags, go somewhere you matter. They deserve nothing. They’re not Magdalenes. You’re just a bum among them. You’re looking for the poor man within? Why don’t you humble
...at the feet of the rich for once? Or does your God just love useless people?"

I could see the small, oblong reflection of the white door in his pupils, and I kept thinking that one of his hookers, one of his holy failures, was going to walk in and I'd see her reflection in the flicker.

"Why don't you embarrass the rich with some of your charity? Go sit on a rich woman's step and bring her to God? Tell me this—if the poor really are the living image of Jesus, why are they so fucking miserable? Tell me that, Corrigan. Why are they standing out there, displaying their misery to the rest of the world? I want to know. It's just vanity, isn't it? Love thy neighbor as thyself. It's rubbish. You listening? Why don't you take all those hookers of yours and have them go sing in the choir? The Church of the High Vision. Why don't you have them sit in the front pews? I mean, there you go on your knees to all the tramps and the cripples and the cripples. Why don't they do something? Because they want nothing but to suck you dry, that's why."

Exhausted, I laid my head against the wall.

I kept waiting for him to give me some sort of bitter benediction—something about being weak towards the strongest, strong against the powerful, there is no peace save in Jesus, freedom is given, not received, some catch-all to soothe me, but instead he let it all wash over him. His face did not betray a thing. He scratched the inside of his arm and nodded.

"Just leave the door open," he said.

He went down the stairwell, footsteps echoing, around the edge of the courtyard, disappeared into the grayness.

I ran down the slick steps of the apartment building. Huge swirls of fat graffiti on the walls. The drift of hash smoke. Broken glass on the bottom steps. Smells of piss and puke. Through the courtyard. A man held a pit bull on a training rope. He was teaching it to bite. The dog snapped at his arm; there were huge metal bracelets strapped across the man's wrists. The snarls rolled across the yard. Corrigan was backing up his brown van, which he'd parked on the side of the road. I slapped the windows. He didn't turn. I suppose I thought I might knock some sense into him, but after a moment the van was out of sight.

Over my shoulder the dog was snapping again at the man's arm, but the man was staring at me, like I was the one trying to rip his wrists. A

...crawled over his face, malevolent and pure. I thought: Nigger. I couldn't help it, but that's what I thought: Nigger.

This place would ruin me: how did Corrigan stand it?

I wandered the neighborhood, hands down in my pockets, not on the pavement, but at the edge of parked cars, an altered perspective. Taxis brushed by, close to my hip. The wind blew the smell of the subways up through the traffic. A hard, musty waft.

I went to the church on St. Ann's. Up the broken steps, into the vestibule, past the holy-water font, into the dark. I was half expecting to see him there, head bowed, praying, but no.

Small red electric candles could be lit at the back of the church. I dropped a quarter inside and heard the deep rattle against the emptiness. My father's ancient voice in my ear: If you don't want the truth, don't ask for it.

Corrigan came home to the apartment late that night. I left the door unlocked but he came in with a screwdriver anyway, began to take all the screws from the chains and locks. "Job to do." He was lethargic and his eyes were rolling around in his head and I should have known then, but I didn't recognize it. He knelt on the floor, eye-level with the doorknob. The underside of his sandals were worn down. The sole had faded away, a little bubble of flat rubber. His carpenter pants were tied around his waist with a length of cord. They wouldn't have stayed up on his hips otherwise. The long-sleeved shirt he wore was tight to his body and the bones of his ribcage were like some odd musical instrument.

He worked intently but he was using a flathead screwdriver for a Phillips head bolt and he had to prop the screwdriver sideways and angle it into the grooves.

I had already packed my bag and was ready to go, find a room, get a bartending job, anything, just get out of there. I pulled the couch into the center of the room under the ceiling fan, folded my arms, waited. The blades couldn't cut through the heat. For the first time ever I noticed that Corrigan had a bald spot beginning in the back of his hair. I wanted to make some crack about it being a monkish thing but there was nothing between us anymore, no words or glances. He toiled away at the locks. A couple of screws fell on the floor. I watched the beads of sweat come down the back of his neck.

He rolled up his sleeve absently, and then I knew.
IF YOU THINK YOU know all the secrets, you think you know all the
cures. I suppose it wasn't too much of a surprise to me that Corrigan was
scoring heroin: he had always done what the least of them had done. It
was the perverse mantra of what he believed. He wanted to hear his own
footsteps to prove that he trod the ground. There was no getting away
from it. It was what he had done in Dublin too, though a different quarry
of recklessness. He was standing on the little ledge of reality he had left,
but it seemed to me that he wasn't getting high, just getting level. He had
an affinity with pain. If he couldn't cure it, he took it on. He was shooting
smack because he couldn't stand the thought of others being left alone
with the same terror.

He left his sleeve rolled up for an hour or so while he dealt with the
locks. The bruises inside his arm were a deep blue. When he was fin-
ished, the door didn't even click closed, just swung on the hinges.

"There," he said.

He went into the bathroom, where I was sure I could hear him strapping
an elastic band around his arm. He came out, long-sleeved again.

"Now leave the friggin' door alone," he said.

He fell soundlessly into bed. I was sure I wouldn't sleep, but I woke to
the usual thrum of the Deegan. The outside world was dependable. En-
gine noise and tire song. Huge metal sheets had been laid over some pot-
holes. They boomed deeply when a truck ran over them.

It was an easy enough choice to stay: it wasn't as if Corrigan was ever
going to ask me to leave. I was up and shaved early in the morning to ac-
company him on his rounds. He stirred him from the blankets. He had a
faint nosebleed and the blood was dark against his stubble. He turned
away. "Put on the tea, will you?" When he stretched, he touched the
wooden crucifix on the wall. It swung back and forth on its nail. There
was a light patch where the paint was not discolored. The faint imprint of
the cross. He reached up to steady it, muttered something about God
being ready to move sideways.

"Leaving today?" he asked.
The rucksack was packed on the floor.
"I was thinking I'd stay a couple more days."
"No problem, brother."

He combed his hair in the fragment of broken mirror, sprayed on
some deodorant. At least he was keeping up pretenses. We took the lift
instead of the stairs.

"A miracle," said Corrigan as the door sighed open, and the little
moons of light shone on the inside panel. "It's working."

Outside, we crossed the small patch of grass in front of the projects,
among the broken bottles. All of a sudden, being around him felt right
for the first time in years. That old dream of purpose. I knew what I had
to do—bring him on the long walk back towards a sensible life.

Among the early-morning hookers I felt strangely charmed. Corr-gan.
Cor-i-gun. Corry—gan. It was, after all, my last name too. It was a
strange taking of ease. Their bodies did not embarrass me as much as
when I'd watched them from afar. Coyly, they covered their breasts with
their arms. One had dyed her hair a bright red. Another wore sparkling
silver eyeliner. Jazzlyn, in her neon swimsuit positioned the strap over
her nipples. She took a deep drag on her cigarette and exhaled smoke in
expert streams from nose and mouth. Her skin shone. In another life she
could have been aristocratic. Her eyes went to the ground as if she was
looking to find something she had dropped. I felt a softening for her, a
desire.

They kept up a wavy pitch of banter. My brother gazed across at me
and grinned. It was like Corrigan whispering in my ear to give his ap-
proval to all I couldn't understand.

A few cars cruised past. "Get outta here," said Tillie. "We got business
to accomplish." She said it like it was a stock exchange transaction. She
nodded to Jazzlyn. Corrigan pulled me into the shadows.

"They all use smack?" I said.
"Some of them, yeah."
"Nasty stuff."
"The world tries them, then shows them a little joy."
"Who gets it for them? The smack?"
"No idea," he said as he took a small silver pocket watch out from his
carpenter pants. "Why?"
"Just wondering."
The cars rumbled above us. He slapped my shoulder. We drove to the
nursing home. A young nurse was waiting on the steps. She stood up
and waved brightly as the van pulled in. She looked South American—
small and beautiful with a clout of black hair and dark eyes. Something fierce shot in the air between them. He loosened around her, his body more pliable. He put his hand on the small of her back, and they both disappeared inside the electronic door.

In the glove box of the van I looked for evidence: needles, packets, drug paraphernalia, anything. It was empty except for a well-worn Bible. In the inside flap Corrigan had written scattered notes to himself: *The wish to make desire null. To be idle in the face of nature. Pursue them and beg for forgiveness. Resistance is at the heart of peace.* When he was a boy he had seldom even folded down the pages of his Bible—he had always kept it pristine. Now the days were stacked up against him. The writing was spidery and he had underlined passages in deep-black ink. I recalled the myth that I had once heard as a university student—thirty-six hidden saints in the world, all of them doing the work of humble men, carpenters, cobblers, shepherds. They bore the sorrows of the earth and they had a line of communication with God, all except one, the hidden saint, who was forgotten. The forgotten one was left to struggle on his own, with no line of communication to that which he so hungrily needed. Corrigan had lost his line with God: he bore the sorrows on his own, the story of stories.

I watched as the short nurse negotiated the ramp with the wheelchairs. She had a tattoo at the base of her ankle. It crossed my mind that she might be the one supplying him heroin, but she looked so cheerful in the hot slanting sun.

"Adelita," she said, extending her hand out to me through the van window. "Corrigan’s told me all about you."

"Hey, get your carcass out here and help us," my brother said from the side of the van.

He was straining to get the old Galway woman through the door. The veins in his neck pulsed. Sheila was just a rag doll of a thing. I had a sudden recollection of our mother at the piano. Corrigan breathed heavily as he heaved her inside, arranged a series of straps around the woman’s body.

"We have to talk," I said to him.

"Yeah, whatever, let’s just get these people in the van..."

He and the nurse glanced at each other across the rim of the seats. She had a little bead of sweat around the top of her lip and she wiped it away with the short sleeve of her uniform. As we drove off, she leaned against the ramp and lit a cigarette.

"The lovely Adelita," he said as he turned the corner.

"That’s not what I want to talk about."

"Well, it’s all I want to talk about," he said. He flicked a look in the rearview mirror and said: "Right, Sheila?" He did a fake drum roll on the steering wheel.

He was back to his old singsong self. I wondered if perhaps he had shot up while inside the nursing home: from what little I knew of addiction, anything at all could happen. But he was bright and cheery and didn’t have many of the hallmarks of heroin, or at least the ones I imagined. He drove with one arm out the window, the breeze blowing back his hair.

"You’re a mystery, you are."

"Nothing mysterious at all, brother."

Albee piped up from the back seat: "Pussy."

"Shaddup," said Corrigan with a grin, his accent tinged a little by the Bronx. All he cared about was the moment he was in, the absolute now. When we had fought as children, he used to stand and take the blows—our fights had lasted as long as I punched him. It would be easy to thump him now, fling him back against the van door, rifle his pockets, take out the packets of poison that were ruining him.

"We should make a visit back, Corr."

"Yeah," he said absently.

"I mean to Sandymount. Just for a week or two."

"Isn’t the house sold?"

"Yeah, but we could find somewhere to stay."

"The palm trees," he said, half smiling. "Strangest sight in Dublin. I try to tell people about them, but they just don’t believe me."

"Would you go back?"

"Sometimes, maybe. I might bring some people with me," he said.

"Sure."

He flicked a look in the rearview mirror. I couldn’t imagine that he wanted to bring the old woman back to Ireland, but I was ready to let Corrigan have whatever space he needed.

At the park he wheeled them into the shadows by the wall. It was a bright day, sunny and close. Albee took out his sheaf of papers, mutter-
ing the moves to himself as he worked on his chess problems. Every time he made a good move he let the brake go on his wheelchair and rocked himself back and forth in joy. Sheila wore a wide-brimmed straw hat over her long white hair. Corrigan dabbed his handkerchief on her brow. She scratched out some sounds from her throat. She had that emigrant's sadness—she would never go back to her old country—it was gone in more senses than one—but she was forever gazing homewards anyway.

Some kids nearby had turned on a fire hydrant and were dancing in the spray. One of them had taken a kitchen tray and was using it as a surfboard. The water skidded him along by the monkey bars, where he fell headlong, laughing, into the fence. Others clamored to use the tray. Corrigan moved over to the fence and pressed his hands against the wire diamonds. Beyond him, farther, some basketball players, sweat-soaked, driving towards the netless basket.

It seemed for a moment that Corrigan was right, that there was something here, something to be recognized and rescued, some joy. I wanted to tell him that I was beginning to understand it, or at least get an inkling, but he called out to me and said he was running across to the bodega:

"Watch Sheila for a while, will you?" he said. "Her hat's tilted. Don't let her get sunburned."

A gang of youths in bandannas and tight jeans hung out in front of the bodega. They lit one another's cigarettes importantly. They gave Corrigan the usual slaps, then disappeared inside with him. I knew it. I could feel it welling up in me. I jogged across, my heart thumping in my cheap linen shirt. I stepped past the litter piled up outside the shop, liquor bottles, torn wrappers. A row of goldfish bowls sat in the window, the thir orange bodies spinning in aimless circles. A bell sounded. Inside, Motown came over the stereo. A couple of kids, crippin' wet from the fire hydrant, stood by the ice cream vauh. The older ones, in their red bandannas, were down by the beer fridges. Corrigan was at the counter, a pint of milk in his hand. He looked up, not the least bit disturbed. "I thought you were watching Sheila."

"Is that what you thought?"

I expected some shove, a packet of heroin into his pocket, some clandestine transaction across the counter, another handslap with the gang, but there was nothing. "Just put it on my tab," said Corrigan to the shopowner, and he tapped one of the fishbowls on the way out.

The shop doorbell rang.

"They sell smack there too?" I asked as we crossed through the traffic to the park.

"You and your smack," he said.

"Are you sure, Corr?"

"Am I sure of what?"

"You tell me, brother, you're looking rough. One look in the mirror."

"You're kidding me, right?" He reared back and laughed. "Me?" he said. "Shooting smack?"

We reached the fence.

"I wouldn't touch that stuff with a barge pole," he said. His hands tightened around the wire, the tip of his knuckles white. "With all respects to heaven, I like it here."

He turned to look at the short row of wheelchairs set out along the fence. Something remained fresh about him, young, even. When he was sixteen Corrigan had written, in the inside of a cigarette packet, that all the proper gospel of the world could be written in the inside of a cigarette packet—it was that simple, you could do unto others what you'd have them do unto you, but at that time he hadn't figured on other complications.

"You ever have the feeling there's a stray something or other inside you?" he said. "You don't know what it is, like a ball, or a stone, could be iron or cotton or grass or anything, but it's inside you. It's not a fire or a rage or anything. Just a big ball. And there's no way to get at it?" He cut himself short, looked away, tapped the left side of his chest. "Well, here it is. Right here."

We seldom know what we're hearing when we hear something for the first time, but one thing is certain: we hear it as we will never hear it again. We return to the moment to experience it, I suppose, but we can never really find it, only its memory, the faintest imprint of what it really was, what it meant.

"You're having me on, right?"

"Wish I was," he said.

"Come on now . . . "

"You don't believe me?"

"Jazzlyn?" I asked, floored. "You haven't fallen for that hooker, have you?"
He laughed heartily but it was a laugh that ran away. His eyes shot across the playground, and he ran his fingers along the fence.

“No,” he said, “no, not Jazzlyn, no.”

Corrigan drove me through the South Bronx under the flamed-up sky. The sunset was the color of muscle, pink and striated gray. Arson. The owners of the buildings, he said, were running insurance scams. Whole streets of tenements and warehouses abandoned to smolder.

Gangs of kids hung out on the street corners. Traffic lights were stuck on permanent red. At fire hydrants there were huge puddles of stagnant water. A building on Willis had half collapsed into the street. A couple of wild dogs picked their way through the ruin. A burned neon sign stood upright. Fire trucks were by, and a couple of cop cars trailed each other for comfort. Every now and then a figure emerged from the shadows, homeless men pushing shopping trolleys piled high with copper wire. They looked like men on a westward-ho, shoving their wagons across the nightlands of America.

“Who are they?”

“They ransack the building, pull the guts of the walls out, and then they sell the copper wire,” he said. “They get a dime a pound or something.”

Corrigan pulled the van up outside a series of tenements that were abandoned but untouched by fire, yanked the gearshift on the steering column down into park.

A haze hung over the street. You could hardly see the top of the street lamps. Warning tape had been fixed over the doorways but the doors behind them had been kicked in. He drew his feet up onto the seat, so that his sandals were nestled close to his crotch. He lit a cigarette and brought it right down to the dregs, threw the butt out the window.

“Thing is, I have a mild case of a thing called TTP or something,” he said finally. “I started getting these bruises all over. Here and here. It’s worst on my legs. They’re splochty. About a year or so ago. At first I didn’t really think anything of it, honest. I had a bit of a fever. A few dizzy spells.

“And then I was in the nursing home in February. Helping them move some furniture from the first floor to the third. Stuff too big to fit in the elevator. And it was hot as hell in there. They keep the heat turned up for all the old ones. You can’t imagine how hot, especially in the stairwell there, where the pipes were. Like Dante had furnished the place. Rough work. So I took off my shirt. Down to my string vest. You know how many years it’s been since I’ve been down to a string vest? And I was halfway up the stairs with a few lads, when one of them points to me, my arms and shoulders, and says that I must have been in some sort of fight.

Truth is, I had been in a fight. The pimps were giving me a hard time for letting the girls use the bathroom. I’d been knocked around a little. Had some stitches over my eye. One of them wore cowboy boots and roughed me up good. But I didn’t give it a second thought until we got the furniture up on the third floor and Adelita was there, directing the traffic. ‘Put this here. Put that there.’ We heaved this big desk into a corner. And the lads were still giving me a hard time about being the only white bloke who still gets in fights in the neighborhood. Like I’m some throwback. Like I’m some Big Jack Doyle, you know. They’re all joking: ‘Come on Corrigan, let’s dance, man, let’s rumble!’ They say they ought to bring me to Zaire, I’m such a fighter. They don’t know I’m in the Order. Nobody knows. Not then anyway, they didn’t. And Adelita came over and just pushed her finger down hard on one of the bruises and she said something like, ‘You’ve got TTP.’ And I made some crack about DDT and she said, ‘No, I think it could be TTP.’ It turns out she’s studying at night. She wants to do medicine. She was a nurse in Guatemala in a couple of fancy hospitals. Always wanted to be a doctor, even went to university and all, but the war kicked in, and she got all caught up in it. Lost her husband. So she nurses here. They won’t take her credentials. She’s got two kids. They’ve got American accents now. Anyway she says something about low platelet counts and bleeding into the tissues and that I’ve got to get it seen to. She surprised me, brother.”

Corrigan rolled down the window of the van and sprinkled some tobacco on a thin piece of paper, lit up.

“So, fair enough, I get it seen to. And she’s hang on. I have this thing they don’t know much about. It’s idiopathic, you know, they don’t know what causes it. But they say it’s serious enough, you can get real sick from it. I mean, you gotta eventually get the treatment or you can die. And so I go home at night and I call on God in the dark, and I say, ‘Thanks, God, another thing to worry about.’ But the thing is, God’s there this time,
brother. He’s there. In plain sight. It would be easier if He wasn’t there. I could pretend I was searching for Him. But no, He’s there, the son of a gun. He’s telling me all the logical things about being sick and getting over it and dealing with it and looking at the world in a new way. The way He does, the way He should talk to you, the Body, the Soul, the sacrament of being alone, being furious with an aim, using it for the greater good. Opening yourself to the promise. But, see, this logical God, I don’t like him all that much. Even His voice, He’s got this voice that I just can’t. I don’t know, I can’t like. I can understand it, but I don’t necessarily like it. He’s out of my range. But that’s no problem. Plenty of times I haven’t liked Him. It’s good to be at a disturbance with God. Plenty of fine people have been in my place and worse.

“I figure being sick is old news anyway and dying’s even older than that. What’s fatal is the big hollow echo every time I tried Him out. See, I just felt hollow every time I tried talking with Him. I gave it everything, brother. My proper confession, you know, about maintaining faith and all. I talked with Father Marek there in St. Ann’s. A good priest. We struggled together, him and I. Hours on end. And with Him too, with Him at all hours of the day. Used to be, though, that the arguments with Him stirred the depths of my heart. I wept in His presence. But He kept coming back at me with all His pure logic. Still, I knew it would pass. I knew I’d get over it. I wasn’t even thinking about Adelita then. She wasn’t even on my mind. It was losing God. The prospect of losing that. The rational part of me knew it was me—I mean, I was just talking to myself. It was obstructing Him. But being rational about it didn’t cure it. You meet a rational God and you say, Well, okay, that’s not my cup of tea right now, Heavenly Father, I’ll come back at a better time.

“You know, when you’re young, God sweeps you up. He holds you there. The real snug is to stay there and to know how to fall. All those days when you can’t hold on any longer. When you tumble. The test is being able to climb up again. That’s what I’m looking for. But I wasn’t getting up. I wasn’t able.

“So, anyway, I’m in the nursing home one Friday afternoon and Adelita was sitting in the stock room, going through the bottles of cough mixture. And I just sat down on the low ladder and was chatting away with her. She was asking me if I was getting treatment in the hospital and I find myself lying, flat-out lying, saying, Yes, of course, everything’s fine, not a bother on me. ‘That’s good,’ she said, ‘because you really need to be looking after yourself.’ Then she stepped over beside me, pulled up a chair, and started rubbing the inside of my arm. She said that I had to keep the blood flowing. She pushed her fingers into my arm here. And it was like she put her hands down deep in the earth. ‘That’s how it feels. I got goosebumps, my blood moving under her fingers. My other hand gripped the side of the ladder. And there was a voice inside me saying, ‘Strengthen yourself against this, this is a test, be ready, be ready.’ But it’s the same voice I don’t like. I’m looking behind the veil of it and all I see is this woman, it’s a catastrophe, I’m descending, sinking like a hopeless swimmer. And I’m saying, God don’t allow this to happen. Don’t let it. She was tapping the inside of my arm with her fingernail, just flicking it. I closed my eyes. Please don’t allow this. Please. But it was so pleasant. So so very pleasant. I wanted to keep my eyes closed and pry them open at the same time. No words for it, brother. I couldn’t stand it. I got up and stormed out of the place. Stumbled out into the van.

“I think I drove all night. I just kept going. Following the white lines. I got snared up on bridges. Had no idea where I was going. Soon enough the lights of the city were fading. I figured I was out somewhere upstate, but it was the island, man, Long Island. I thought I was going west, across some great open land, where I’d work everything out, but I wasn’t. I was actually heading east along this big highway. And I just kept going. Driving and driving. Cars zipping by. I had to keep muttering to myself and lighting matches, smelling the sulfur, to keep awake. Trying to pray. To make two plus two equal five. And then the highway ended, middle of nowhere, it seemed like, and I just followed a smaller road. Out through farmland and past these isolated houses, little pinpoints of light. Montauk. I’d never been there before. The dark got thicker, no lights at all. And it turned into this little one-laner. That’s what takes you to the end of this country, man, a tiny little potholed road that ends up at a lighthouse. And I thought: ‘This is right, this is where I’ll find Him.’

“I got out and stepped in among the dunes, along the beach. I walked about and screamed at Him, under the clouds. Not a star shining anywhere. No response. You’d expect a bit of moon at least. Something. Anything. Not even a boat. It was like everything had deserted me. And I could still feel her touch there, on the inside of my arm. Like it was deep
and there was something growing there. And I’m out in the middle of an endless beach with a lighthouse twirling behind me. Thinking stupid things. The way you do. I’ll move away. I’ll give it all up. I’ll leave the Order, I’ll go back to Ireland, find a different poverty. But nothing made sense. The end of the country, man, but there was no revelation.

“After a while I gathered myself into that silence and finally I sat down in the sand and said to myself. ‘Well, maybe it will only make me better for Him in the long run, I have to fight this, battle it, use it for my own advantage, it’s a sign.’ I resigned myself to it. That which doesn’t break you, blah blah blah. I was running a fever but I left the beach, got back in the van and calmed myself down, and said good-bye to the lighthouse, the water, the east, and said it will be fine, nothing holy is free, and I drove all the way back to the flat, parked the van, fell into the lift, and closed the door. I actually fell asleep in the lift. Only woke up when it started moving. Found myself staring at the face of some frightened black woman. I scared her. I locked myself in for two days. Waiting for the bandages to blacken, y’know, that sort of thing. Waiting for it to blow over. And I bolted the chain. Can you believe that? I bolted the door shut. So much for the crap I gave you, brother, about the locks.”

He chuckled a little and a spray of headlight went across his face from the far side of the boulevard.

“The girls thought I was dead. They were banging on the door, wanting to use the facilities. And I didn’t reply. I just lay there, trying to pray for some sign of gentle mercy. But I kept seeing Adelita in my mind. Eyes closed, eyes open, it didn’t matter. Things I shouldn’t have been thinking of. Her neck. The back of her neck. Her clavicle. The side of her face in a slice of light. There she was, taking me in. And I wanted to scream at her. No, no, no, you’re just pure lust, and I’ve made a pact with God to fight lust, please just let me be, please just go. But she’s still standing there, smiling, understanding. And I’d whisper to her again: Please go. But I knew it wasn’t lust, it was so much more than lust. I was looking for a simple answer, the sort we give to children, you know. And I kept thinking that we were all children once, maybe I could return. That’s what echoed in my head. Go back to being a child. Sprint along the strand there. Up past the tower. Run along the wall. I wanted that sort of joy. Make it simple again. I was trying, really trying, to pray, get rid of my lust, return to the good, rediscover that innocence. Circles of circles. And when you go around in circles, brother, the world is very big, but if you plow straight ahead it’s small enough. I wanted to fall along the spokes to the center of the circle, where there was no movement. I can’t explain it, man. It was like I was staring at the ceiling, waiting for the sky. All this banging was still going on outside the door. Then hours of silence.

“At one time I heard Jazzlyn, you know, that voice of hers, like she just swallowed the Bronx, man, leaning in against the keyhole and screaming: ‘Okay! To hell with you, you dumbass cracker!’ It’s the only time I laughed. If only she knew. ‘To hell with you, you dumbass cracker, I’ll piss somewheres else!’

“Then they actually got the Guards in to bash down the door. And they come rushing in, flashing badges, guns drawn. They stop and stare. Looking at me, lying on the couch, the Bible over my face. And one cop is saying, ‘What’s going on here, man? What the hell is this? He’s not dead. He smells bad, but he’s not dead.’ I’m just lying there and I swipe the Book off my face and cover my eyes with my forearm. And Jazz comes charging in behind them, saying, ‘I gotta go, I gotta go.’ Then comes Tillie with her pink parasol. Then both of them came out and started shouting. ‘How come you keep the door locked, Corrie? Asshole! That’s mean and unusual punishment. That’s the honkypox, man!’ The Guards were standing there, open-mouthed. They couldn’t believe what was going on. One of them was wrapping a piece of gum tight around his finger. He kept winding it, like he wanted to strangle me. I’m sure they were thinking that they’d done this for nothing, for a bunch of working girls who just wanted to pee. They were not happy at all. Not at all. They wanted to give me a citation for wasting their time, but they couldn’t dream up anything. I said maybe they should give me one for losing my faith and then they thought I was really off my rocker. One of them said to me, ‘Look at this shithole—get a life, man!’ And it was just so simple, the way he said it, the young Guard, right in my face: ‘Get a life, man!’ He kicked over the flowerpot as he went out the door.

‘Tillie and Angie and Jazzlyn and the girls threw a ‘not-dead’ party for me. They even bought me a cake. One candle. I had to blow it out. I was going to take it as a sign. But there were no signs. I went back down the nursing home and that night I asked Adelita if she’d mind just moving the blood around a little—that’s the way I said it, ‘Move the blood around
a little, would you? She gave me that big cheerful smile and said that she was busy on her rounds, maybe she'd get to it later. I sat there, trembling with God, all my sorrows, bound up inside. And sure enough she came back a short while later. It was all very simple. I just stared at the dark of her hair. Couldn't look in her eyes. She was rubbing my shoulder and the small of my back and even my calf muscles. I kept hoping maybe somebody would come in the door and find us, make a big stink, but nobody did. And I kissed her. And she kissed me back. I mean, how many men can say they'd rather be nowhere else in the world? That's how I felt. That moment. That I wanted nothing but the here and now, and nowhere else. On earth as it is in heaven. That one moment. And then after a few days I started going to her house.”

“She's got three kids, you said.”

“Two. And a husband who got killed down in Guatemala. Fighting. For, I don't know, Carlos Arana Osorio or someone. A fascist of some sort. She hated him, the husband—she got caught up in this marriage young—and still she's got his picture on the bookcase. For the kids to know that he exists, existed, that they had a father. We just sit there and he's looking out at us. She doesn't talk about him. He's got this hard stare. I sit in her kitchen and she cooks a little and I move the food around on the plate and we chat and then she rubs my shoulders while her kids are in the other room, watching cartoons. She knows I'm in the Order, knows the celibacy rules, everything. I told her. She says that if it doesn't matter to me then it doesn't matter to her. She's the loveliest person I've ever known. I can't stand it. I can't deal with it. I sit there and it's like these blades turning in my stomach. The voice I go home to is not the voice I ever heard before. I can't lay a hand on the old one. He's gone. I find myself stretching out at night, trying to grab a hold of it but He's not there. All I get is sleeplessness and disgust. Call it what you like. Call it joy, even. How can I pray with this inside me? How can I do what I'm supposed to do? I don't even judge myself by my actions. I judge myself by what's in my heart. And it's rotten because it wants to own things, but it's not rotten because it's the most content I've ever been, and it's the most content she's ever been too, sitting there, together. We're happy. And I keep wondering if we're supposed to be happy. I haven't slept with her, brother. At least not... We've thought about it, yes, but, I mean...”

He faded off.

“You know my vows. You know what they mean. I used to think there was no other man in me, no other person, just me, the devoted one. That I was alone and strong, that my vows were everything, and I wasn't tempted. And I've turned it over and over in my mind. What happens if this? What happens if that? And maybe it's not even a matter of losing faith. I stand in the mess of myself. It's against everything I've ever been, and suddenly just watching it all disappear, and then also lying to her, even about my treatment.”

“What's this sickness mean? This TTP stuff?”

“It means I've just got to get better.”

“How?”

“I have to get treatment. Plasma replacement and that sort of thing. I will.”

“Painful?”

“Pain's nothing. Pain's what you give, not what you get.”

He took out the slim pack of rolling papers and sprinkled the tobacco along the curved edge of a paper.

“And her? Adelita? What're you going to do?”

He worked the grains over, looked out the window.

“Her kids are out of school for the summer. They're running around. Lots of time on their hands. Used to be that I went over with the excuse that I was helping them with their homework. But it's summer, so there's no more homework. Guess what. I'm still going over. And no real excuse except the truth—I want to see her. And we just sit there, Adelita and me. I have to come up with other excuses for myself. Oh, they need someone to help clean up the rubbish in front of the apartment. She really needs to get that toaster fixed. She needs time to study her medical books. Anything. Except I can't pretend that I can give them a catechism lesson because they're Lutheran, man. Lutherans! From Guatemala. Just my luck, man! I find the only non-Catholic woman in Central America. Brilliant. She's a believer, though. She's got a heart, huge and kind. She really does. She tells me these stories about where she grew up. I go to her house every chance I get. I want to. I need to. That's where I've been disappearing all these afternoons. I guess I wanted to keep it hidden from everyone.

“And all the time I'm sitting there, in her house, thinking that this is
There are moments we return to, now and always. Family is like water—it has a memory of what it once filled, always trying to get back to the original stream. I was on the bottom bunk again, listening to his slumber verses. The flap of our childhood letter box opened. Opening the door to the spray of sea.

"You ask me if I'm using heroin, man?" He was laughing, but looking out the bar window at the rafters of the highway. "It's worse than that, brother, much worse."

...IT WAS LIKE ALL...the clocks agreed and the fridge was humming and the sirens outside sounded out like flutes. He had talked her free. Just mentioning her was enough for him: he became new.

For the next couple of days they saw each other as much as they could—in the nursing home mainly, where she changed her shift just to be with him. But Adelita also came to the apartment, knocked on the door, uncorked a bottle of wine, and sat across the table. She wore a ring on her right hand, twirling it absently. There was a grace and a toughness about her, entwined. They needed me there. I was hardly allowed to stand up from the table. "Sit down, sit down. I was still the safe border between them. They weren't ready to fully let go. Some propriety held them back, but they looked as if they wanted to leave some of their good sense behind, at least for a while.

She was the sort of woman who became more beautiful the more you watched her: the dark hair, almost blue in the light, the curve of her neck, a mole by her left eye, a perfectblemish.

I suppose, as the nights wore on, my presence made them feel that they had to entertain someone, that they were in it together, that they were more properly alone by being together.

She spoke softly to Corrigan, as if to get him to lean closer. He would look at her as if it were quite possible he wasn't ever going to see her again. Sometimes she just sat there with her head upon his shoulder. She gazed past me. Outside, the fires of the Bronx. To them it could have been sunlight through the girders. I dragged my chair across the floor.

"Sit down, sit down."

Adelita had a wild side that Corrigan liked but couldn't bring himself to grin about. One night she wore a wide white off-the-shoulder blouse and
orange hot pants. "The blouse was modest, but the pants were tight to her thighs. We drank a little cheap wine, and Adelita was whooped up a little. She gathered her shirt and knotted it at the front, showing the brown of her stomach, stretched slightly from children. The small dip of her belly button. Corrigan was embarrassed by the cling of the pants. "Look at you, Adie," he said, his cheeks flushing. But instead of asking her to unknot the blouse and cover herself up, he made a theater of giving her one of his own shirts to wear over her outfit. As if it were the tender thing to do. He draped it around her shoulders, kissed her cheek. It was one of his old black collarless shirts, past her thighs, almost down to her knees. He hitched it on her shoulders, half afraid that he was being a prude, the other half rocked by the sheer immensity of what was happening to him.

Adelita paraded around the apartment, doing a slight hula-hoop movement.

"I'm ready now for heaven," she said, tugging the shirt lower still.

"Take her, Lord," said Corrigan.

They laughed, but there was something in that, like Corrigan wanted his life to make sense again, that he had fallen from grace, all he had now was his old recklessness and temptation, and he wasn't sure he could handle it. He looked up as if the answer might be written on the ceiling. What might happen if she tumbled short of his dreams? How much might he hate his God if he left her behind? How might he detest himself if he stuck to his Lord?

He walked her home, holding hands in the dark. When he returned to the apartment, many hours later, he hung the shirt on the edge of the mirror. "Orange hot pants," he said. "Can you believe it?"

We sat, hunched over the bottle.

"You know what you should do?" said Corrigan. "Come work at the nursing home."

"Need a bodyguard, is that it?"

He smiled, but I knew what he was saying. Come help me, I'm still that hopeless swimmer. He wanted someone from the past around in order to make sure that it wasn't all just a colossal illusion. He couldn't just be an observer: he had to get some message through. It had to make sense, if even just for me. But I got a job in Queens instead, in one of the shambrock bars I dreaded. A low ceiling. Eight stools along the formica counter. Sawdust on the floor. Pouring pale draft beer and putting my own dimes in the jukebox so I wouldn't have to hear the same old tunes over and over. Instead of Tommy Makem, the Clancy Brothers, and Donovan, I tried some Tom Waits instead. The single-minded drinkers groaned.

I figured I might write a play set in a bar, as if it had never been done before, as if it were some sort of revolutionary act, so I listened to my countrymen and wrote notes. Theirs was a loneliness pasted upon loneliness. It struck me that distant cities are designed precisely so you can know where you came from. We bring home with us when we leave. Sometimes it becomes more acute for the fact of having left. My accent deepened. I took on different rhythms. I pretended I was from Carlow. Most of the customers were from Kerry and Limerick. One was a lawyer, a tall, fat sandy-haired man. He lorded it over the others by buying them drinks. They clinked glasses with him and called him a "motherfucking ambulance chaser" when he went to the bathroom. It was not a series of words they would have used at home—motherfucking ambulance chasers weren't big in the old country—but they said it as often as they could. With great hilarity they injected it into songs when the lawyer left. One of the songs had an ambulance chaser going over the Cork and Kerry mountains. Another had an ambulance chaser in the green fields of France.

The place grew busier as the night went on. I poured the drinks and emptied the tip jar.

I was still staying with Corrigan. He spent a few evenings at Adelita's place, but he never told me a word about them. I wanted to know if he'd finally been with a woman but he simply shook his head, wouldn't say, couldn't say. He was still in the Order after all. His vows still shackled him.

There was a night in early August when I dragged myself back on the subway, but couldn't find a cab on the Concourse. I didn't like the idea of walking back to Corrigan's place at that hour. There had been beatings and random murders in the Bronx. Being held up was close to ritual. And being white was a bad idea. It was time to get a room of my own somewhere else, maybe the Village or the East Side of Manhattan. I stuck my hands in my jeans, felt the rolled-up wad of money from the bar. I had just begun walking when a whistle sounded from the other side of the Concourse. Tillie was pulling up the strap on her swimsuit. She had been kicked out of a car and her knees were scraped raw.

"Sugarplum," she shouted as she stumbled towards me with her
handbag waving above her head. She had lost her parasol. She put her arm in the crook of mine. "Whoever brought me here is going to have to take me home."

It was, I knew, a line from Rumi. I stood, stunned. "What's the big deal?" she shrugged. She dragged me on. Her husband, she said, had studied Persian poetry.

"Husband?"

I stopped on the street and gaped at her. Once, as a teenager, I had examined a piece of my skin on a glass slide, staring at it through a microscope: an amplitude of ridged canals striving beneath my eye, all pure surprise.

My intense disgust—so remarkable on other days—in that single moment turned into an awe for the fact that Tillie didn't care at all. She jiggled her breasts and told me to get a grip. It was her ex-husband anyway. Yes, he had studied Persian poetry. Big fucking deal. He used to get a suite at the Sherry-Netherland, she said. I assumed she was high. The world seemed to grow smaller around her, shrunken to the size of her eyes, painted purple and dark with eye shadow. I suddenly wanted to kiss her. My own wild, yearning overburst of American joy. I leaned towards her and she laughed, pushed me away.

A long pimped-up Ford Falcon pulled up at the curb and, without turning, Tillie said: "He already paid, man."

We continued up the street, arm in arm. Under the Deegan she nestled her head against my chest. " Didn't you, honey?" she said. "You already paid for the goodies?" She was rubbing her hand against me and it felt good. There's no other way to say it. That's how it felt. Good.

"Call me SweetCakes," she said in an accent that loitered around her. 
"You're related to Jazzlyn, aren't you?"
"What about it?"
"You're her mother, right?"
"Shut up and pay me," she said, touching the side of my face. Moments later there was the surprising condolence of her warm breath against my neck.

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THE RAID BEGAN in the early morning, a Tuesday in August. Still dark. The cops lined up the paddy wagons in the streetlight shadows near the overpass. The girls didn't seem to care half as much as Corrigan did. One or two dropped their handbags and ran towards the intersections, arms flailing, but there were more paddy wagons waiting there, doors open. The police tightened the handcuffs and herded the girls into the well of the dark vehicles. Only then could we hear any shouting—they leaned out, looking for their lipstick or their sunglasses or their stilettos. "Hey, I dropped my keystone!" said Jazzlyn. She was being helped into the wagon by her mother. Tillie was calm, as if it happened all the time, just another rising sun. She caught my eye, gave half a wink.

On the street, the cops sipped their coffees, smoked their cigarettes, shrugged. They called the girls by their names and nicknames. Foxy. Angie. Daisy. Raf. SweetCakes. Sugar pie. They knew the girls well and the crackdown was as lethargic as the day. The girls must have heard the rumor of it beforehand, and they had gotten rid of their needles and any other drug paraphernalia, dropped them down into the gutter. There'd been raids before, but never so complete a sweep.

"I want to know what's happening to them," said Corrigan, going cop to cop. "Where are they going?" He spun on his heels. "What are you arresting them for?"

"Stargazing," said a cop, bashing into Corrigan's shoulder.

I watched a long pink boa scarf get caught up in the wheels of a patrol car. It wrapped the wheelbase as if in affection, and bits of tufted pink spun in the air.

Corrigan took down a series of badge numbers. A tall female cop plucked the notebook out of his hand and shredded it slowly in front of him. "Look, you dumb Mick, they'll be back soon, okay?"

"Where're you taking them?"

"What's it to you, buddy?"

"Where are you bringing them? Which station house?"

"Step back. Over there. Now."

"Under what statute?" said Corrigan.

"Under the statute that I'll kick your ass if you don't."

"All I want is an answer."

"The answer's seven," the female cop said, staring Corrigan down.

"The answer's always seven. Get it?"

"No I don't."

"What are you, man, some sort of fruit or something?"
One of the sergeants swaggered up and shouted: “Somebody take care of Mr. Lovey-Dovey here.” Corrigan was pushed to the side of the road and told to stand on the curb. “We'll look you up if you say another word.”

I guided him aside. His face was red and his fists tightened. Veins thrummed at his temple. A new splotch had appeared on his neck. “Take it easy, okay, Corr? We'll sort it out later. They'll be better off in a station anyway. It's not as if you actually like them being here.”

“That's not the point.”

“Oh, Jesus, come on,” I said. “Just trust me. We'll get to them later.”

The paddy wagons bounced down off the curbs and all but one of the squad cars followed behind. A few onlookers gathered in clumps. Some kids rode their bicycles in circles around the empty space as if they'd found themselves a brand-new playground. Corrigan went to pick up a keyring from the gutter. It was a cheap little glass thing with a picture of a child in the center. Flipped over, there was a picture of another child.

“That's the reason,” said Corrigan, thrusting the keyring towards me. “They're Jazz's kids.”

Whosoever brought me here is going to have to take me home. Tillie had charged me fifteen dollars for our little tryst, patted me on the back, then said I represented the Irish quite well, a grand dollop of irony in her voice. Call me SweetCakes. She flicked the ten-dollar bill and said she knew some Khalil Gibran too—she would quote a bit or two if I wanted.

“Next time,” I said. She'd rifled through her handbag. “Are you interested in a little horse?” she asked as she buttoned me up. She said she could get some from Angie. “Not my style,” I said. She giggled and leaned closer to me. “Your style?” she said. She put her hand on my hip, laughed again. “Your style!” There was a sickening moment when I thought she had pickpocketed all my tips, but she hadn't; she just tightened my belt and slapped me on the arse.

I was glad that I hadn't gone with her daughter. I felt almost virtuous, as if I hadn't been tempted at all. Tillie's smell had lingered with me for a couple of days and it returned again now that she had been taken off and arrested.

“She's a grandmother?”

“I told you that,” said Corrigan. He stormed towards the last remain-
a crisp black shirt and dark trousers, went to the mirror again, pasted his long hair back with water. “Well, well,” he said. He took a small scissors to his hair and lopped off about four inches. His fringe went in three smooth snips.

“I’m going to go down to help them,” he said.

“Where?”

“The parthenon of justice.”

He looked older, more worn. With his haircut, the bald spot was more pronounced.

“They call it the Tombs. They’ll be arraigned in Centre Street. Listen, I need you to take my shift in the nursing home. I talked with Adelita. She already knows.”

“Me? What am I going to do with them?”

“I don’t know. Take them to the beach or something.”

“I have a job in Queens.”

“Do it for me, brother, will you, please? I’ll give you a shout later on.”

He turned at the door. “And look after Adelita for me too, will you?”

“Sure.”

“Promise me.”

“Yeah, I will—now, go.”

Outside I could hear the sounds of the children following Corrigan down the stairs, laughing. It was only when the apartment had fallen into full silence did I remember that he had taken the brown van with him.

At a rental joint down in Hunts Point, I used the very last of my tips to make a deposit on a van. “Air-conditioning,” said the clerk with an idiotic grin. It was like he was explaining science. He had his badge name pasted over his heart. “Don’t run it too hard, it’s brand new.”

It was one of those days when the summer seemed to have fallen into place, not too warm, cloudy, a tranquilized sun high in the sky. On the radio a DJ played Marvin Gaye. I maneuvered around a low-slung Cadillac and onto the highway.

Adelita was waiting by the ramp of the home. She had brought her children to work—two dark beauties. The younger one tugged at her uniform and Adelita went down to eye level with her, kissed the child’s eyelids. Adelita’s hair was tied back with a long colorful scarf and her face shone.

I understood perfectly, then, what Corrigan knew: she had an interior order, and for all her toughness there was a beauty that rose easily to the surface.

She smiled at the idea that we should try the beach. She said it was ambitious but impossible—no insurance, and it was against the rules. Her kids screamed beside her, tugged on her uniform, grabbed her wrist. “No, no,” she said sharply to her son, and we went through the routine of loading all the wheelchairs and jamming the kids between the seats. Litter was pinned against the railings of the park. We pulled the van in under the shade of a building. “Oh, what the hell,” said Adelita. She slid across into the driver’s seat. I rounded the back of the van. Albee was looking out at me, and he mouthed a word with a grin. No need to ask. Adelita beeped the horn and pulled the van out into a light summer traffic. The children cheered as we merged onto the highway. In the distance, Manhattan was like something made out of play boxes.

We found ourselves snared in the Long Island traffic. Songs came from the back, the old folk teaching the kids bits and pieces of songs they couldn’t really conjure. “Raindrops Keep Fallin’ on My Head.” “When the Saints Go Marching In.” “You Should Never Show Your Granny off the Bus.”

At the beach, Adelita’s kids tore down to the waterfront while we lined the wheelchairs up in the shade of the van. The van shadow grew smaller as the sun arced. Albee dropped the suspenders from his shirt and opened up his shirt buttons. His arms and neck were extraordinarily tanned but beneath the shirt his skin was transluscent white. It was like watching a sculpture of two different colors, as if he were designing his body for a game of chess. “Your brother likes those hookers, huh?” he said. “You ask me, they’re a bunch of rip-off artists.” He said nothing more, just stared out at the sea.

Sheila sat with her eyes closed, smiling, her straw hat tilted down over her eyes. An old Italian whose name I didn’t know—a dapper man in perfectly pressed trousers—dented and redented his hat upon his knee and sighed. Shoes were taken off. Ankles exposed. The waves crashed along the shore and the day slipped from us, sand between our fingers.

Radios, beach umbrellas, the barn of salt air.

Adelita walked down to the waterfront, where her children were kicking happily in the low surf. She drew attention like a draft of wind. Men watched her wherever she went, the slender curve of her body against the
white uniform. She sat on the sand beside me with her knees pressed against her breasts. She shifted and her skirt rose slightly; a red welt on the ankle near where her tattoo was.

"Thanks for renting the van."

"Yeah, no problem."

"You didn't have to do it."

"No big deal."

"It runs in the family?"

"Corrigan's going to pay me back," I said.

A bridge lay between us, composed almost entirely of my brother. She shaded her dark eyes and looked down towards the water, as if Corrigan might have been in the surf alongside her children, not in some dark courthouse arguing a series of hopeless causes.

"He will be down there for days, trying to get them out," she said. "It's happened before. Sometimes I think they would be better off if they learned their lesson. People get locked up for less."

I was warming up to her, but wanted to push her, to see how far she'd go for him.

"Then he'd have nowhere to go, would he?" I asked. "At night. Nowhere to work."

"Maybe, maybe not."

"He'd have to go to you, then, wouldn't he?"

"Yes, maybe," she said, and a little shadow of anger went across her face. "Why you ask me this?"

"I'm just saying."

"I don't know what you're saying," she said.

"Just don't string him along."

"I'm not stringing him along," she said. "Why would I want to, as you say, string him along? ¿Por qué? Me dice que eso."

Her accent had sharpened: the Spanish had an edge to it. She let the sand drift between her fingers and looked at me like it was the first time she'd seen me, but the silence calmed her and finally she said: "I don't really know what to do. God is cruel, no?"

"Corrigan's one is, that's for sure. I don't know about yours."

"Mine is right beside his."

The kids were throwing a frisbee at each other in the surf. They leaped at the flying disc and landed in the water and splashed.

"I'm terrified, you know," she said. "I like him so much. Too much. He doesn't know what he's going to do, you understand? And I don't want to stand in his way."

"I know what I'd do. If I were him."

"But you're not, are you?" she said.

She turned away and whistled at the children and they came trudging up the sand. Their bodies were brown and supple. Adelita pulled Eliana close and softly blew sand off her ear. Somehow, for whatever reason, I could see Corrigan in both of them. It was like he had already entered them by osmosis. Jacobo climbed in her lap too. Adelita nipped his ear with her teeth and he squealed in delight.

She had safely surrounded herself with the children and I wondered if it was the same thing she did with Corrigan, reeling him in close enough and then shielding herself, gathering the many and making it too much. For a moment I hated her and the complications that she had brought to my brother's life, and I felt a strange fondness for the hookers who had taken him away, to some police station, down to the very dregs, some terrible cell with iron bars and stale bread and filthy toilets. Maybe he was even in the cells alongside them. Maybe he got himself arrested just so he could be near them. It wouldn't have surprised me.

He was at the origin of things and I now had a meaning for my brother—he was a crack of light under the door, and yet the door was shut to him. Only bits and pieces of him would leak out and he would end up barricaded behind that which he had penetrated. Maybe it was entirely his own fault. Maybe he welcomed the complications: he had created them purely because he needed them to survive.

I knew then that it would only end badly, her and Corrigan, these children. Someone or other was going to get torn asunder. And yet why shouldn't they fall in love, if even just for a short while? Why shouldn't Corrigan live his life in the body that was hurting him, giving up in places? Why shouldn't he have a moment of release from this God of his? It was a torture shop for him, worrying about the world, having to deal with intricacies when what he really wanted was to be ordinary and do the simple thing.

Yet nothing was simple, certainly not simplification. Poverty, chastity, obedience—he had spent his life in fealty to them, but was unarmored when they turned against him.
I watched Adelita as she loosened an elastic band from her daughter’s hair. She tapped her on the bottom and sent her along the beach. The waves broke far out.

“What did your husband do?” I asked.

“He was in the army.”

“Do you miss him?”

She stared at me.

“Time doesn’t cure everything,” she said, looking away along the strand, “but it cures a lot. I live here now. This is my place. I won’t go back. If that’s what you’re asking me, I won’t go back.”

It was a look that suggested she was part of a mystery she wouldn’t let go of. He was hers now. She had made her declaration. There could indeed be no going back. I recalled Corrigan when he was a boy, when everything was pure and definite, when he walked along the strand in Dublin, marveling at the roughness of a shell, or the noise of a low-flying plane, or the eave of a church, the bits and pieces of what he thought was assured around him, written in the inside of that cigarette box.

Our mother used to like to use a gambit in the telling of her stories:

“Once upon a time and long ago, in fact so long ago that I couldn’t have been there, and if I had been there, I could not be here, but I am here, and I wasn’t there, but I’ll tell you anyway. Once upon a time and long ago...” whereupon she would launch into a story of her own creation, fables that sent my brother and me to different places, and we would wake in the morning wondering if we had dreamed different parts of the same dream, or if we had duplicated each other, or if in some strange world our dreams had overlapped and switched places with each other, something I would have done easily after I heard about Corrigan’s smash into the guardrail. Teach me, brother, how to live.

We have all heard of these things before. The love letter arriving as the teacup falls. The guitar striking up as the last breath sounds out. I don’t attribute it to God or to sentiment. Perhaps it’s chance. Or perhaps chance is just another way to try to convince ourselves that we are valuable.

Yet the plain fact of the matter is that it happened and there was nothing we could do to stop it—Corrigan at the wheel of the van, having spent all day down in the Tombs and the courtrooms of lower Manhattan, driving north up along the FDR, with Jazzlyn beside him in the passenger seat, her yellow high heels and her neon swimsuit, her choker tight around her neck, and Tillie had been locked away on a robbery charge, she had taken the rap, and my brother was giving Jazzlyn a lift back to her kids, who were more than keyrings, more than a flip in the air, and they were going fast along the East River, hemmed in by the buildings and the shadows, when Corrigan went to change lanes, maybe he hit the indicator, maybe he didn’t, maybe he was dizzy or tired or out of sorts, maybe he’d gotten some medicine that slowed him or fogged his vision, maybe he tapped the brake, maybe he cut it too hard, maybe he was gently humming a bit of a tune, who knows, but it was said that he was clipped in the rear by a fancy car, some old antique, nobody saw the driver, a gold vehicle going about its everyday applause of itself, it caught the back end of his van, nudged it slightly, but it sent Corrigan into a spin across all three lanes, like some big brown dancing thing, elegant for a split second, and I think now of Corrigan gripping the steering wheel, frightened, his eyes large and tender, while Jazzlyn beside him screamed, and her body tightened, her neck tensed, it all flashing in front of her—her short vicious life—and the van skidded on the dry roadway, hit a car, hit a newspaper truck, and then smashed headlong into the guardrail at the edge of the highway, and Jazzlyn went head-first through the windshield, no safety belt, a body already on the way to heaven, and Corrigan was smashed back by the steering wheel, which caught his chest and shattered his breastbone, his head rebounding off the spidery glass bloody, and then he was whipped back into the seat with such force that the metal frame of the seat shattered, a thousand pounds of moving steel, the van still spinning from one side of the road to the other, and Jazzlyn’s body, only barely dressed, made a flying arc through the air, fifty or sixty miles per hour, and she smashed in a crumpled heap by the guardrail, one foot bent in the air as if stepping upwards, or wanting to step upwards, and the only thing of hers they found later in the van was a yellow stiletto, with a Bible sitting canted right beside it, having fallen out of the glove compartment, one on top of the other and both of them littered with glass, and Corrigan, still breathing, was bounced around and smashed sideways so that he finished up with his body twisted down in the dark well by the accelerator and the brake, and the engine whirled as if it still
wanted to get fast and be stopped at the same time, all of Corrigan’s weight on both of the pedals.

They were sure he was dead at first, and he was loaded in a meat wagon with Jazzlyn. A cough of blood alerted a paramedic. He was taken to a hospital on the East Side.

Who knows where we were, driving back, in another part of the city, on a ramp, in a traffic jam, at a toll booth—does it matter? There was a little bubble of blood at my brother’s mouth. We drove on, singing quietly, while the kids in the back seats dozed. Albee had solved a problem for himself. He called it a mutual checkmate. My brother was scooped into an ambulance. There was nothing we could have done to save him. No words that would have brought him back. It had been a summer of sirens. His was another. The lights spun. They took him to Metropolitan Hospital, the emergency room. Sprinted him down through the pale-green corridors. Blood on the floor behind them. Two thin tracks from the back trolley wheels. Mayhem all around. I dropped Adelita and her children outside the tiny clapboard house where they lived. She turned and looked over her shoulder at me, waved. She smiled. She was his. She would suit him. She was all right. He would find his God with her. My brother was wheeled into the triage room. Shouts and whispers. An oxygen mask over his face. Chest ripped open. A collapsed lung. One-inch tubes inserted to keep him breathing. A nurse with a manual blood-pressure cuff. I sat at the wheel of the van and watched as the lights went on in Adelita’s house. I saw her shape against the light curtains until heavier ones were drawn across. I started the engine. They held him in traction with counterweights above the bed. A single breathing machine by his bed. The floor so skidddy with blood that the interns had to wipe their feet.

I drove on, oblivious. The Bronx streets were potholed. The orange and gray of arson. Some kids were dancing on the corners. Their bodies in flux. Like they had discovered something entirely new about themselves, shaking it through like a sort of faith. They cleared the room while they took X-rays. I pulled in under the bridge where I had spent most of my summer. A few girls were scattered around that night—the ones who had missed the raid. Some swallows scissored out from underneath the rafters. Seeding the sky. They didn’t call out to me. My brother, in Metropolitan Hospital, still breathing. I was supposed to work in Queens, but I crossed the road instead. I had no idea what was happening. The blood swelling in his lungs. Towards the tiny bar. The jukebox blared. The Four Tops. Intravenous lines. Martha and the Vandellas. Oxygen masks. Jimi Hendrix. The doctors did not wear gloves. They stabilized him. Gave him a shot of morphine. Shot it right into his muscle. Wondered about the bruises on the inside of his arm. Took him for a junkie at first. The word was he’d come in with a dead hooker. They found a religious medal in the pocket of his pants. I left the bar and crossed the late-night boulevard, half drunk.

A woman called out to me. It wasn’t Tillie. I didn’t turn. Darkness. In the courtyard some kids were high and playing basketball without a ball. Everyone working towards repair. The single lights of the heart machine beeping. A nurse leaned into him. He was whispering something. What last words? Make this world dark. Release me. Give me love, Lord, but not just yet. They lifted his mask. I got to the fifth floor of the projects. The stairs exhausted me. Corrigan lay in the hospital room, in the cramped space of his own prayer. I leaned against the apartment door. Someone had tried to pry open the gold lock on the telephone. Some books lay scattered on the floor. There was nothing to take. Perhaps he drifted in and outconstantly. In and out, in and out. Tests going to see how much blood he had lost. In and out. In and out. The knock came on the door at two in the morning. Not many knocked. I shouted for them to come in. She pushed the door slowly. My brother’s heart machine at a slow canter. In and out. She held a tube of lipstick. That I recall. Not a girl I knew. Jazzlyn has been in a crash, she said. Maybe her friend. Not a hooker. Almost casually. With half a shrug. The lipstick going across her mouth. A vivid red slash. His brother’s heart machine blipping. The line like water. Not returning to any original place. I burst out through the door. Through the graffiti. The city wore it now, the swirls, the whores. Fumes of the fresh.

I stopped at Adelita’s house. Oh, Jesus, she said. The shock in her eyes. She pulled a jacket over her nightgown. I’m bringing my kids, she said. She bundled them into my arms. The taxi sped, flashing its lights. At the hospital, her children sat in the waiting room. Drawing with crayons. On newspaper. We ran to find Corrigan. Oh, she said. Oh. Oh, God. Doors swinging open everywhere. Closing again. The lights fluorescent above us. Corrigan lay in a small monkish cell. A doctor closed the door on us. I’m a nurse, said Adelita. Please, please, let me see him, I have to see him. The doctor turned with a shrug. Oh, God. Oh. We pulled
two very simple wooden chairs up by his bed. Teach me who I might be. Teach me what I can become. Teach me.

The doctor came in, clipboard to his chest. He spoke, quietly, of internal injuries. A whole new language of trauma. The electrocardiogram beeped. Adelita leaned down to him. He was saying something in his morphine haze. He had seen something beautiful, he whispered. She kissed his brow. Her hand on his wrist. Heart monitor flickering. What’s he saying? I asked her. Outside, the clack of wheels down the corridor. The screams. The sobbing. The odd laughter of interns. Corrigan whispered something to her again, the blood bubbling at his mouth. I touched her forearm. What’s he saying? Nonsense, she said, he’s talking nonsense. He’s hallucinating. Her ear to his mouth now. Does he want a priest? Is that what he wants? She turned to me. He says he saw something beautiful. Does he want a priest? I shouted. Corrigan was lifting his head slightly again. Adelita leaned down to him. Her reigning calmness. She was softly crying. Oh, she said, his forehead’s cold. His forehead’s very cold.

FROM OUTSIDE, THE SOUNDS OF PARK AVENUE. Quiet. Ordered. Controlled. Still, the nerves jangle in her. Soon she will receive the women. The prospect ties a small knot at the base of her spine. She brings her hands to her elbows, hugs her forearms. The wind ruffles the light curtains at the window. Alençon lace. Handmade, tatted, with silk trimmings. Never much for French lace. She would have preferred an ordinary fabric, a light voile. The lace was Solomon’s idea, long ago. The stuff of marriage. The good glue. He brought her breakfast this morning, on the three-handled tray. Croissant, lightly glazed. Chamomile tea. A little slice of lemon on the side. He even lay down on the bed in his suit and touched her hair. Kissed her before he left. Solomon, wise Solomon, briefcase in hand, off downtown. The slight waddle in his step. The clack of his polished shoes on the marble floor. His low-growled good-bye. Not mean, just throaty. Sometimes it strikes her—there is my husband. There he goes. Same way he’s been going for thirty-one years. And then a sort of silence interrupted. The drifting sounds, the snap of the lock, the dim bell, the elevator boy—G’morning Mr. Soderberg!—the whine of the door, the clank of machinery, the soft murmur of descent, the clanging stop at the lobby below, the roundelay of the cables rising.

She pulls the curtains back and peeps out the window once more,