5

1

They watched and waited, but Peter's father didn't materialize. Hours passed, and at twenty after five Jessy ruefully told her friend she'd better get home, or else her mom would boil and skin her. "I'm sorry to leave you in the lurch."

"Y'aint," said Peter, ducking into his room and putting on a fresh shirt and his shoes. The juice-stained shirt and shorts from earlier had been chucked into the pile of laundry by the washing machine. He'd been walking about in just shorts and bare feet. "I'm coming with. No way in hell I'm spending the night alone after what just went on. Too damn creepy."

"All right," said Jessy hesitantly. "I'll tell my mom one more for dinner, I guess."

"So what's your dad do, Pete?" Shelia asked that night, passing him the casserole dish filled with beef stroganoff. It was his third helping. Peter didn't see a lot of food that wasn't prepackaged in a box and frozen, or warmed over. A charitable widow who had been a good friend of his mom's when she was alive periodically checked in and kept father and son fed. Her own kids had grown up and moved out, and, accustomed to more mouths around the table, she always cooked too much . . . so she froze the week's leftovers and brought them to the Knowles house on Sunday afternoon after services at the Methodist church.

"Long-haul trucker for Brob," Peter fibbed slightly, swallowing a mouthful of food. "On a big job in Joplin. I got left to my lonesome

"No. I checked at your place an hour ago. Car ain't there."

"Damn." They were speaking with their mouths because they agreed that think-talking was a bit too weird, and besides, it was such a strain. "All right, ducks-in-a-row time. What do we know?"

"We know Wardell's running for governor on the anti-annexation kick," Jessy said. Peter held one finger aloft. "Past that . . . what?"

"We know my dad's up 'n run off to glory knows where, and he took his car that he ain't driven in more 'n six years. We know while he was recovering from his accident he got a visit from a nigger feller name of Bart Camber, who marked up his head 'n told him he was going to come back one'a these days and cash in on some debt he kept going on about. *And* we know," Peter finished, wiggling all four fingers on his left hand, "that you saw Camber the night you split your head open in your momma's car." He licked his lips. "When'd you have your accident, Jess?"

"Glory," replied Jessy, in a supplicant tone. "I was thirteen then, I think, so that'd have to be about . . . seb'ney nine or eighty."

"My dad turned turtle on a feed road going off Highway 44, a few miles south of St. Louis. Where was *your* accident?"

"I don't know, dammit—I only started figuring out there *was* an accident, like, last week," Jessy answered crossly. "Up till now I believed my mom's horseshit story about getting my scar doing a half-gainer off the back steps when I was four."

"You'll have to talk to your mom again."

"I can't, I told you. She either is lying or she honestly forgot everything."

"No," said Peter, diddling his fingers at the sides of his head. "I mean—" he assumed a faraway creepy voice—"*ask* her."

"I don't think I can do that to my mom," said Jessy. They were silent for a moment, and then she hesitantly said, "Hey, I've got an idea about your project the day after tomorrow. It's probably dumb 'n uglier than the south end of a mule going north . . . and it'll take some time and doing, but for what it's worth, I bet I can pull it off."

Five minutes later, after she had told him her plan, Peter was grinning from ear to ear. "Dip me in shit, Jess," he exclaimed. "I love it. Beats the crap out of a diorama."

"I figured it would," Jessy, unused to having good ideas, modestly smiled, shyly threading her fingers through her Peter Pan curls.

3

I don't think I can do that to my mom, Jessy had said, but that night she reconsidered as she watched the Channel Seven News again. They were running another piece on Wardell. If that skinny, goofy, giggling aspirant for the office of Missouri governor was a part of her immediate future, she had to know what was the connection between him, Brian Knowles, and that strange hombre Bart Camber.

According to the report, Wardell spent his days rubber-stamping mail for the tri-county area and his nights tooling about in a retired, decomissioned postal vehicle, speaking in every venue from colleges to kindergartens to bars to boardrooms. He was on his last leg of a statewide tour, and the schools in the Salt River district would be among his last stops before the big day, November 4.

Shelia was seated in her chair again, watching the news with her daughter, and looking very disapproving of such fare. The man had two canvas mailbags, straps crisscrossed over his matchbox chest like gunbelts, on each hip, and was emphatically hurling the contents of them into the screaming, rioting melee. It was candy. The man was shameless—part Santa Claus, part street-corner preacher. The way he talked reminded her of a radio host out of Chicago—Biondi, his name was—that her dad used to listen to. This was about '62 or '63, when they lived in Amarillo; then, Shelia had been a gawky adolescent who hadn't quite lost all her baby teeth and was five years from losing her virginity. Every afternoon, while his wife was either napping in the rear bedroom or off shopping or at one of her hen parties with the ladies from church, John Gorving would set his beat-up transistor on the

kitchen windowsill that was painted a hideous green which was peeling in spots. He would flump backwards on a chair and chug whiskey out of a fruit jar while he diddled with the dial, cussing a blue streak at the cheap old radio until he got WLS coming in good and clear.

Shelia recalled watching her father guffawing at the man's profane antics, his brown wrinkled apple-face working and nearly toothless mouth gaping wide, until his eyes streamed. They'd taken Biondi off the air for doing half of what Wardell would do up on that podium. Times had changed—*that* was evident.

Shelia reached for her glass of tea on the table, but Jessy had clapped her hand down on the top of it. "Honey, what in God's graces you doin'? Get your hand off 'n that; I'd like a sip—" She touched Jessy's hand, and that's when she felt something: a gentle *bump*, as her will overrode her mother's. Shelia's eyes went wide and blank as the girl's essence suffused her.

"Momma?" said Jessy. "Y'okay?"

"Yes," answered Shelia, in the dreamy voice of a half-asleep person. "I'm just fine."

"I'm going to ask you a question, then, and I think you'll answer truthful because I have busted down all your inhibition barriers. Momma, what really happened the night of the accident? When I was thirteen?"

Shelia spoke haltingly, dreamily, and the mental pictures that accompanied the speech really told the story. It was a hot Saturday night in the middle of June, 1980. She and Jessy had been on the road for a good part of the day and into the night, visiting relatives over in Paducah, and were on their way home. Shelia hated driving when it got dark out, and it was after ten . . . so when she saw a truck stop on the outskirts of St. Louis, she decided to pull up to it and ask if anyone there knew a good place to tuck in till dawn.

The 3-7-77—named for the dimensions of a grave, for the proprietor was an ex-logger and ex-trucker who was a big fan of Norm Maclean—was a pretty rough joint, hardly the place for a 33-year-old single mother with a pubescent daughter to

boot . . . but there they were that night. Several burly men, all leering smiles and bristly beards and beat-up caps and flannel, appreciatively turned their heads in the women's direction. "Well, lookee c'here," grunted one man in coveralls that stank of tobacco and wood pulp and likely, once he removed them, could comfortably stay standing in the shape of his body. "We got us a fox in the chicken coop."

"Ayup," another growled out of a chest like a beer barrel. "Kin we he'p you, missus?"

"My little girl and I are looking for a motel or something to spend the night in," Shelia said, trying hard to mask the note of discomfort in her voice and failing. "We just come in from over the state line, we're tired, and we need the use of a phone, and—and a phone book. Unless you know the number of some place—?"

"I know a number you kin have," said the driver with the beer-barrel chest. "Mine." His buddies at the counter chortled.

"Well, isn't that a sweet offer," said Shelia, as Jessy cowered behind her. She was small for her age, and scrawny. Her dark bangs hung sloppily in her eyes. "H-However, I just need to get the number of a nice, reasonable-priced room for my daughter and me—"

"Don't cost nothing to come home with me," a driver who looked like a sunburned scarecrow said in a shrill, cracking voice. Next to him a muscular gentleman with a square head and a crewcut sniggered. "My home's over 'n University City, s'near you kin spit on it."

The men crowded about Shelia and Jessy, except for Squarehead, who was nursing a mug of black coffee. One reached over and pinched her nipple, giving it a sadistic tweak that made her yelp. Another sniffed her hair like a dog and made slobbering noises. Squarehead watched their antics, a shit-eating grin on his face.

"What are you sitting there yukking it up for when I'm damn near getting raped?" shrieked Shelia. "*Stop* them!"

"They're just funnin' ya, you stupid bitch," answered Squarehead. "Don't get s'mad; it just encourages them. Shit, O'Dell, you got a wife 'n fam'bly at home. Cut it out."

Scarecrow backed down a bit, but Barrel-Chest, Stinky-Pants, and two others, a short Hispanic with a rat's face and a thickset black man with a mustache and no front teeth, didn't. Jessy furiously stepped forward and in her thin yet forceful voice, yelled to Squarehead, "Don't you *dare* call my mother a stupid bitch, you ignorant shitkicker!"

"I beg your pardon?" The other men had ceased their lewd advances. The square-headed trucker knitted his thick brows at the broomstick with the sassy mouth. Shelia was too paralyzed to say anything to apologize for her daughter's rudeness.

"I said, you're an ignorant shitkicker. Now leave my momma *alone*."

Squarehead stood up, then kneeled and got eye-level with the child. He was a six-foot-three bear of a man, and she was barely four-nine. She wasn't a broomstick; he realized, more like a *tooth*pick. "S'posin' I don't, Olive Oyl. D'en whut?"

"I hope something bad happens to you! *To all* of you! I hope you crash and burn up your trucks and you all *die*! A horrible, horrible death!" The girl's face was streaming now, and she turned and bolted out the door of the 3-7-77. Shelia followed her little girl, and the men made no attempt to pursue, sobered by Jessy's furious outburst.

Shelia found Jessy cowering in the car's passenger seat, her bony shoulders rocking with sobs. "You know, you really oughtn't to say to folks they should die," she scolded gently. "You don't want no one to die."

"But I *do*, Momma! Every dang one of them! The way they talked to you! And . . . and touched you . . . s'bad . . . ." Jessy's eyes were ringed raw and crimson.

Shelia rocked her child, shushing, saying it'd be all right, it'd be all right, until she was reasonably composed again. She then inserted the key into the lock, reasoning that they'd find a place by themselves up the main road, and if worse came to worse, they'd camp out in the car overnight.

"So you and me turned off of Highway 44," Shelia recounted, her voice low and calm. Jessy's chest felt like two balloons were expanding in it. "And when we were coming down the side road

leading off the main thoroughfare, one of those big trucks came hurtling into our lane. I swerved, and you clocked your noggin on the dash, knocking yourself out. I wound up on the other side of the road with my nose in the ditch and my front bumper knocked off on a signpost. The driver of the truck . . . he flipped . . . he was carrying pipe, and it spilled everywhere and choked off the road . . . I got out of the car, and lucky I spotted a bank of pay phones on my side of the road so I could call the police and the am'balance."

Shelia finally described the scene after the paras arrived, strapping Jessy to one gurney and the driver of the truck to the other . . . and Jessy's breath hitched when she saw his identity—younger and softer, but still unmistakable. She screamed and released her mom's hand, clawing her own face. Shelia lay back in her armchair and shut her eyes, as if she had simply drifted off to sleep watching TV. Perry Mason was having a vigorous discussion about a case with Della Street, the best shrieker in Hollywood, over dinner.

Jessy burst into the guest bedroom, prompting Peter to screech, fumbling to get under the covers, "Dip me in shit! I'm in my underdrawers, Jess!" He then noticed how flushed and sweaty she looked. "What the hell—?"

"I did it," she panted, "I read my mom's mind. And you won't *believe* what I've learned. I had my powers before the accident ever happened. I didn't get them from a hit on the head. And the second thing is—oh, god! This is so hard!"

Peter prompted her to continue. "I was there that night, Pete. At that truck stop, the Three-Something-Something—it's a place on Route 44, with numbers for a name. With your dad. I met him the same night he cracked up on the highway . . . h-he and his buddies were harassing Momma and me, and I wished him dead, and . . ." She choked back a sob. "I almost killed your daddy six years ago, by being in the car that caused him to veer off the road, because e-every time I wish for bad things to happen to people, they do, through me, and I'm responsible for your daddy being crippled and cut up and-and making deals with Bart Camber and running out on you, and I-I am so motherfucking *sorry*!"

this time because my usual babysitter wasn't available, so I asked Jessy if I could bunk here a couple nights."

"Jessy's friends are always welcome," Shelia said, though her eyes—and Jessy didn't need to be a mind reader to discern that—said, *Except that dreadful boy Lew Follet.*

Let it go, Momma, Jessy thought, skewering a broccoli clump with her fork. *It's ancient history. Even Gail Vosbikian and her bald little pussy won't have that ugmo no more.* She also wondered why Peter had lied about what this father did for a living.

T'weren't a complete lie, Peter's voice said, except it wasn't out loud; it was in her mind! *He* was *a trucker. I just figured your mom'd get 'spicious and ask too many questions if I said he was a security guard. Truckers got a better 'scuse to be away from their families for long stretches of time than security guards do.*

How are you inside my head? she thought back.

'S like driving a well-wore-down road, I guess, or traveling a route you do 'smuch you can go it in your sleep. I've been in your head a few times, and I guess I know the way. You haven't been in mine as often, so you thoughts sound sort of fuzzed-out, like trying to get a AM radio station after dark. They ought to get clearer with practice.

Can you read my mom?

I'd have to touch her. Even then it'd be a crapshoot—dunno when I can expect a flash off 'n a mind I never seen before. I don't have a mental map of her head's inner works.

"So did you kids see the news today?" Shelia asked. "That postman fella that's runnin' for governor's plannin' to speak at Jess' old high school Friday night."

"Really? That's where I go too."

"They didn't talk about it in class today?"

"I didn't go. I was sick."

"Oh. Well, I think they might talk about it again on the ten o'clock news tonight. It's a quarter of nine now, so finish dinner so you can get your studying done." Peter had told Ms. Gorving that her daughter was helping him in English, which was another lie—his grades in Dwyer's class were fairly high; in fact, except for

algebra, all his marks were A and B level. He was worried, though, about his smashed diorama, which was due in three days. He had been so proud of himself for not putting off things till the last minute, and a fat lot of good it had done him. The significance of the doll, the meaning it held for his father, the fact that he'd disappeared and taken his car on the road for the first time in a long time, and the cryptic dealings he had with this man Camber who called himself an "exchanger", whatever that meant, weighed heavily on the young man's mind.

He had brought his copy of Fowles' *The Collector* along, hoping to be inspired by it to create a new project. Jessy monopolized the book, however, which drew Shelia's attention. "Hey, I thought *he* had to study that, not you," she admonished as she sealed the leftover food in a plastic container.

"I've read it," Peter said, "but she ain't. Maybe together we can come up with a few new insights. Fresh eyes 'n all."

This book is wild. Jessy's thoughts were faint, like a signal blowing in from Memphis, or maybe over as far as Chicago or Springfield (Illinois), but he caught the gist.

Ayup. I'm thinking maybe I could draw a picture? It's easy, and it shouldn't take near as long as my diorama to set up.

Creative boy like you? You can come up with something far more original than a drawing. Muddy as it was, the goading tone in her think-voice came through quite clearly.

Time is tight, Jess.

I know, but iffwee . . . Part of it was garbled, as if a hand had diddled with her tuner, then it swam back in clearer. . . . *umthing.* She'd been distracted slightly, looking at her mother pass by behind them, peeking over her shoulder at the text of the book.

"Ayup," he said aloud. Think-talking was fun, but liable to give him a pie-cutter of a headache if it went on too long.

The Wardell segment on channel seven didn't run until the last five minutes of the broadcast, where the local stories and the human-interest angles were generally relegated. Shelia sat in her

armchair, sipping heavily sugared iced tea and keeping the volume on the set muted so the kids could study. When she saw the graphic of the candidate over the anchorwoman's right elbow, however, she hummed urgently for their attention and turned up the sound.

"He's the joker in the political deck, who frequently refers to Reagan as 'President Cowboy' and doesn't bother to hide his contempt for wealthy politicos," said the anchorwoman, dressed in a red blazer with yellow piping and a big green 7 on the breast pocket. "However, his infectious laugh and earthshaking views have caught our collective attention. He's Carl Thomas Wardell, a 33-year old Sikeston postal worker who announced his intention to run last February, and whose press conferences play like an eccentric ballet."

"'Eccentric ballet'," murmured Shelia. "Ain't nothing dignified or choreographed enough t'call him that. Just a crazy old man shoutin' and rilin' up the other crazies what turn out to hear him air his gums."

The screen cut to file footage of a rawboned man standing on an auditorium stage, dressed in a blue suit with funny patches sewn on each arm. A moment later, when the camera went for a close-up, Jessy realized they were official postal-worker insignias, and the trousers had a yellow stripe stitched up the side of each leg.

"D'yall realize," the eccentric prophet shouted, "That the number of abortions in this country for girls fourteen years old have riz twenty percent in the last decade?" His sandy-red hair was slicked back along his head and tied in the back with a piece of black ribbon. Wardell had an idea it made him look like Thomas Jefferson, from whom his middle name was derived, who was also a madcap eclectic, as well as our only redheaded Commander-in-Chief. Someone had told him years ago he looked "like that actor what played the Riddler on that *Batman* television show", and he took it to heart. He had studied Frank Gorshin, whom he *did* favor, and incorporated practiced mannerisms like his icy, malevolent stare and his crooked smile. Wardell's eyes were clear as cold water. "They gone from ele'ben thousand, six hunnert and thu'tty to

nearly *sixteen* thousand since the bicentennial! Your own daughters and baby sisters may be *in* that number!" The crowd murmured.

"My opponents on both sides, the rich silver-spoon suckin' folk, think hollerin' like zoo monkeys and protestin' or shuttin' down the clinics'll take care of the problem?" The next word was bleeped out. "If 'n a girl wants rid'a her baby so bad she's gonna do it herself in a dirty alley with a toilet plunger, a warsh-rag, and a bottle'a rubbin a'cohol!" He uttered his trademark giggle.

"Land sakes," snorted Shelia. She figured he may have done his research all right, and knew the numbers, so bully for him . . . but she didn't hear him giving out any magic solutions to the problem. She had never thought twice about aborting either of her children—the one she was raising or the one she gave up. It seemed strange and cruel that the good Lord would throw good seed away on mothers who would just as soon try to uproot what sprouted and chuck it in the furnace, while there were plenty of women who wanted babies but found their bodies weren't up to the task.

"Well, I'll be dipped in shit," said Peter, borrowing a favorite expression of his dad's. Mentally: *you think we're s'posed to stop this man from winning the governorship?*

"Search me," replied Jessy aloud, not thinking. Her mother didn't seem to note the incongruity.

"Wardell is also an extremely vocal critic of the President's Strategic Defense Initiative," the female newscaster's voice said over footage of the man moving his head and hands viciously. His hands and head was moving up and down viciously, and his duck's-ass ponytail bobbed in tandem. Jessy wasn't sure if this was the same press conference or a different one.

"—another thing," bawled Wardell when the audio of him returned. "President Cowboy thinks he's on the back po-wuch of his mansion in Californy shooting skeet! He wants to turn the world into a carnival shootin' gallery and blow Nakiter Khrushchev's nuk-a-ler mis-syles out 'n the sky like they was clay pigeons—and he wants to do it all on *your money*!" There were vehement shouts from the frothing

crowd, followed by Wardell's high cackle. "I think he's a little confused, the ol' scoundrel! Thinks he's in the middle'a filmin' one'a his shoot-em-up pitchers! I think that! Don't you?"

Perspiration was pouring off the candidate's face in the following sound bite, it was outside, in an open-air forum—a park, maybe—and either the heat of the day or the effort of talking, probably both, had combined to make Wardell look haggard and sweaty. Yet the sun didn't wilt his bumptious spirit.

The female newscaster commented over the video that Wardell was also rabidly against private citizens owning handguns. "People gettin' shot left and right. I *dee*-clare. What you expect," howled the damp-faced Frank Gorshin lookalike, "when a gun-totin' old buzzard like President Cowboy's warmin' the seat?" He paused to drink in both a glass of ice water and the crowd's applause, and to mop his face with a handkerchief. "We should ban 'em all, straight 'cross the board, from the bee-bee popguns to the heavy machine-gun repeaters. It's them damn movies like President Cowboy's what makes guns look good t' the kiddies. Glor-ee-fuh-*cay*-shun'a killin's what it is! I predict in this state sometime in the next ten years it won't just be guns on the street or in the bars. Little Billy and Janey'll be bringin' the damn things int' the M'sourah *schools*!"

Wardell was half-right. There *was* a wave of school shootings in the spring of '98, but they happened about 130 miles southwest of the postman's home in unincorporated Sikeston, in another state. Jessica Burton, 30, married and using her full first name, was working there as a high school guidance counselor. She was talking to a student whose best friend was shot and killed in one of the attacks.

"Why?" sobbed the girl. Her hair was sandy-red and her complexion was pale as buttermilk. Freckles were smattered across her cheeks and the bridge of her nose, like someone had been painting and she'd gotten too close to them the second they unthinkingly flicked paint off the tip of the brush, and the droplets

had hit her. "People are getting shot left and right, like in the movies and on TV." She wore a tee-shirt with characters from that show *South Park* on it, a picture of a decapitated boy in a pool of his own blood. Jessica was aware of the irony; this was a world where, for the young, death was either unknown or entertainment. It jarred them to see it real, in their face, given a name. "God, I wish guns didn't *exist*! Why aren't they all just *banned*?"

"Guns don't kill people. *Assholes* kill people."

The 15-year-old with the *South Park* tee and the freckle-smattered face looked at her counselor with eyes round as noodles in soup. She'd never heard a grown-up cuss in school. On Mrs. Burton's desk was a book turned facedown. It was a copy of the February 1994 issue of *Mnemosyne*, its spine broken and its pages soft as velvet from many readings. Shelia had sent it to her daughter several years back with a note enclosed: "Pete Knowles from the old neighborhood just made it big! Thought you might want to see it for yourself! Love, Momma."

The name she knew, but for some reason the face wouldn't come to her mind readily; it was as if someone had taken a photograph and rubbed an eraser over it, blurring the features. Jessica had read the story a hundred times. The main character made her think of that shithouse-rat crazy postal worker they'd seen on the evening news years ago when he ran for office. The girl in it didn't strike a chord with her—after all, her hair, though still short and curly, had thickened into a pleasing, feminine ear-length bob . . . and, thanks to motherhood, she'd since developed quite a figure.

"You think he could be right, Momma?" said thin, flat nineteen-year-old Jessy Gorving in 1986. "About little kids shooting up the schools?

"Sakes alive, I hope not . . . but who knows, he could turn out to be right on the damn money," said Shelia, sipping her tea and fluttering her shirt collar to cool herself off. Indian summer wasn't

quite over and done in upper Missouri. "Even a blind pig finds an acorn now 'n again."

That's where Peter got the idea for the title of his first short story, about the precognitive postal worker. He sent the 9000-word wonder off on Halloween 1993 to *Mnemosyne*, a small-press magazine with a circulation of barely two thousand folks. The day the reply came from the magazine, January howled outside. Peter was packing to go to the University at Laramie, a five-hour drive away, in three days. His father's blood spoke in his face with its boxy jaw and in his tall, broad-shouldered body, but was softened by his mother's eyes and slim, artistic fingers. Standing among half-packed suitcases and piles of shirts and pants on the bed in his room, he wore a tee-shirt with a caricature of rapper Humpty Hump doing his signature namesake dance on it, his hands trembling so bad he had to ask his cousin Matt to open the letter for him.

He was expecting a rejection slip; he found instead a $250 check, paid on acceptance. It covered the cost of his textbooks, with a sliver left over just big enough for the indulgence of a sheepskin seat cover for his car (actually his dad's old '74 Dodge, which he inherited; it would crap out halfway through sophomore year. With it went the last physical token of his late father, and after he sold it to a dealer for $100 he gave up driving.). The young writer wouldn't sell another piece for over three more years.

"Shh, you two," Peter said, waving his hand at the women. "I wanna hear this." He had barely heard a reporter's question, something about how the annexation of 62 would actually *benefit* the residents by allotting more tax money for repairing the pot-holey streets and fixing the busted streetlight on one of the rural roads, so why did he fight it so much? Wardell didn't seem to like the question, so, his face assuming a childlike sulk, he promised, "I'll answer that the on'y way I know how, Woodward." He pivoted,

hitched his trousers down, held the microphone to his bony, sunless ass, and released a burst of flatulence that was amplified by the speakers wired on trees and poles about the platform.

Shelia was aghast, because she had no stomach for such things. "Bathroom humor!" she exclaimed. "It's all an immature mind like his can come up with in a crunch! Bath . . . room . . . *humor*!"

Peter and Jessy laughed raucously. The newscaster, looking like she was desperately trying to hide a giggle, her mouth twisting like a bad fishing line, said, "Well, it seems Candidate Wardell knows his mind and isn't afraid to . . . um . . . speak it. This is Barbara Kitterly, with your Channel Seven News at Night, signing off. Good evening to you."

Perry Mason came on. Shelia reached over and snapped off the set, saying, "And with that, I am going to bed." Peter agreed and went into Jessy's grandfather's old room, which served as an unofficial guest bedroom, taking his copy of *The Collector* with him. Jessy wished he hadn't, as she wanted to finish reading it before she went to bed. Her mom had work in the morning, and Peter had school, but she wasn't tired, and her life was empty.

Well, it used *to be*, she thought. *I'm getting the feeling that it's about to get pretty full come Friday night, what with this Wardell character speaking at Lemona High and me and Pete s'posed to stop him—maybe—from becoming governor . . . or even higher, possibly, should the wind blow right. Why not? We got a cowboy President, ain't we?* She had another feeling that before this was over and done with, she'd be *begging* for empty.

2

Peter and Jessy took lunch together again on the stone bench in the rear of the school Wednesday. He had the Big Mac again, but this time she had the Filet O'Fish. "Watching my figure," she said, though she was so slim and light already Peter believed a really good fart would blow her away.

"My dad home yet?"