# Watching Matthew

# Damon Knight

I’M BLIPPING OUT OF THAT place, the dormhouse or whatever you call it, and in two ticks I’m up in the sunlight, getting a bird’s-eye view of Dog River. I can see the two white frame houses side by side near the corner of Eighth and Columbia, each with a half-enclosed porch about big enough for a burial. The front of the house on the right, where our parents live, has two windows, one of them closed by heavy drapes; it’s like a witch-face with one eye open and one shut.

I can tell by looking that it’s the summer of 1933, when you’re ten years older than I will ever be, Matt Kolb. There you are, all by yourself at the back of the strip of lawn between the houses. You’re driving a post into the turf, using a croquet mallet for a hammer. Beside you is the croquet set in its rack — another post, five more mallets and six balls striped around their middles black, red, yellow, green, white, orange, one color for each.

Later you’ll fill out, but now you’re a skinny kid with horn-rimmed glasses and a lot of hair. Just above your hairline is a scar where Father says you fell down when you were a baby. You’re frowning as you work. If you think you’ve made a mistake, you grab your own nose and wobble it fiercely. You’re learning Latin and German from Father, but he thinks you don’t get enough exercise.

When you’re finished with the first post, you pick up the other one and take it to the front of the yard. You kneel there and move the second post back and forth by half-inches until you have it lined up with the first post and the standpipe in the middle of the lawn. You’re trying to get it mathematically precise, like Mother when she sets the dinner table with knives and spoons.

You hold the second post in position while you get to your feet, then hammer the post in firm and straight. You rub the back of your neck as you walk to the rear of the lawn that means you have felt my presence, but you don’t know what it is; you just think you have a prickle in the back of your neck.

I follow you behind the house, past the garden with its neat rows of bean frames and tomato tepees. At the end of the driveway the garage doors stand open, and the space inside is orderly in deep shadow. Everything here belongs to Father, and everything is in its place. On one wall, behind a padlocked door of heavy fencing in a wooden frame, hangs a cabinet full of tools. Everything sharp is in there — hoe, shovel, pickaxe, axe, hatchet, garden trowel, even the scissors and kitchen knives. If you wanted to take any tools, you’d have to get through the fencing with wire cutters. The catch is that if there were wire cutters anywhere in the garage, they’d be in the cabinet.

Nearby in an open bin are a pair of brown-stained gardening gloves and two stakes made from scrap one-by-twos. The pointed ends, roughly shaped with a hatchet, are blunted from being driven into the dirt so many times. Father uses the stakes to lay out his furrows in the garden, and you use them too by special permission. The stakes are tied together with twine, and the twine is wrapped around one of the stakes in a large egg-shaped lump.

I blip up again, and as I drift above the houses I can see children converging from three directions. Leroy McKenzie and another boy are running together down Eighth Street toward the back yards; Ted Underwood and Rick Hogan are on their way from the dead end of Columbia Street, and Neola Collier is just emerging from the yellow house across the way.

By the time I get back, you’ve run the twine from one croquet post to the other, wrapping it around the standpipe in the middle of the lawn. The standpipe is a piece of iron pipe that stands up about a foot off the ground, with a valve and a hose connection at the top. The valve always drips a little, no matter how hard you turn it off.

Leroy and his friend walk up together. “Who’s this?” you say.

“He’s my cousin. His name’s Pete Bryan. Can he play too?”

“I guess, unless there’s too many.” You run the twine back to the first stake again, halve it to find the center, and put a wicket there. Neola comes up the lawn, then Rick and Ted, and they all stand watching. You put two more wickets at either end, then a wicket all the way over to one side, midway between the middle and end wickets, and another opposite. Then two more just like them in the other half of the court.

You look at your watch. “Okay, let’s start. Pete, you know how to play?”

“No.”

“We’ll show you. Pick a color and take a mallet and ball.” The other kids already have theirs, and the only color left is black.

“Okay, put your ball a mallet’s-head length from the first wicket, see, like this. Now just knock the ball through these two wickets. You get one more shot for each wicket you go through.”

Pete hits the ball awkwardly and it bounces off the first wicket. “Do I get to go again?”

“Not right now. Wait till it’s your turn.”

The game proceeds decorously, according to rule and custom, until Rick Hogan knocks his ball through the first two wickets and hits Pete’s ball. He moves his ball next to Pete’s, puts his foot on his own ball, and whacks it so hard that Pete’s ball flies down to the end of the lawn. Then Rick hits Ted’s ball, takes two shots, and gets into position behind the side wicket.

In the next round Rick goes through the two front wickets, hits the post, goes back through the same wickets and hits your ball, knocks it the length of the court. Hitting other players’ balls and going through wickets, he winds up in front of the end two wickets. You try to hit him from your corner of the field, and miss.

Rick goes through the last two wickets, but instead of hitting the stake, knocks his ball away from it and becomes a rover. He hits your ball and knocks it to the front of the court, hits Leroy’s ball and slams it the other way, hits Pete’s ball. Ted and Neola go over to him, and Ted says, “Hey, you don’t have to hit everybody all the time.” Rick pushes Ted, who falls over the standpipe and hurts his leg.

Rick’s cheeks are flushed. He turns, raises his mallet like a golf club, takes a full swing and knocks the black ball bouncing across the street into the Colliers’ yard. Then he throws his mallet against the side of the house and walks away. The others watch him moving slowly, straight-backed, up the middle of the street out of sight. “What’s the matter with him?” Pete asks Ted.

“You know his dog Rex?”

“Yeah.”

“He got funned over by a car. Rick’s brother Oren went and shot Rex with his gun, and Rick didn’t want him to, so he’s mad.”

They hear a rapping and look up. The curtain has been drawn back in the comer window and they see the pink-jowled face of Mother there. Her eyes are bulging with anger, one more than the other. She shakes her finger at them and drops the curtain.

“Is that Matt’s mother?” Leroy asks.

“Yeah. I seen her once before, Like this, through the window.”

“She never goes downtown or anything?”

“No.”

Ted is up, Limping a little. All the kids are walking away now. In a few minutes they’re all gone except Neola, who brings you the black ball that Rick knocked into her yard. The ball is split halfway around the middle, showing its brown pressed-wood interior. The croquet set is ruined. You’re taking deep breaths, trying not to cry.

“Sorry,” Neola says.

“Okay.”

Neola walks back across the street, goes into her house and closes the door. You begin gathering the wickets and posts. You pick up the stakes and twine and put them back in the garage. You carry the croquet set through the back porch into the kitchen, where the worn linoleum shows the edges of the warped floorboards underneath. No one is there, but through the open doorway you can see Father in the living/dining room, grading papers at the table. Father looks up. “Good game, son?”

You do not reply. This is always the way it is; I think I’m going to make it come out different this time, but that never works. When you open the basement door, a cold air breathes up. I follow you down the dusty unpainted stairs; you put the croquet set under the stairs where it belongs, then climb up again to your lonesome room, but I keep going all the way to the back of the basement, under the dirt, down through the black darkness to that place, whatever you call it. Where the little bones are.

# 

# 2. All this

Matt Kolb, you’re sixteen now, a high-school sophomore in Dog River, Oregon, and I’m your twin, the dead one, following you around: invisible, impalpable, unthinkable, just a damp skin of nothing at all that sticks to you wherever you go. They have never told you about me, and you’ll never find out in this life, but you sense me out of the corner of your brain like a floater in your eyeball.

As Somerset Maugham said in another connection (or will say, I don’t care which), there are great advantages in being dead; I’m j-j-just trying to think what they are. Where I exist is outside your time, and I know things you don’t — for instance, I know we’re only three years and eight months from Pearl Harbor, a necessary event in the scheme of history, but you’re on a tangent now and may not get there.

Mother is in the locked ward in Salem and probably is not coming back. Father doesn’t go out to his lodge meetings anymore — he says he doesn’t want to leave you alone at night, but in fact he doesn’t want to leave you with anyone else either. After bedtime you hear the sounds of men’s voices in the living room, the mountain coming to Mohammed. What do the brothers do there? Mother used to pretend they took off all their clothes and danced around in their little aprons.

You make your own school lunches a day ahead of time (baloney sandwiches, an egg, sometimes a tomato). Father cooks dinner when he gets home (pork chops, hamburger, or macaroni and cheese). The kitchen knives are in the kitchen now, not locked up in the garage as they used to be.

Father leaves the house earlier than you do and gets home later; you have a house key, which you are forbidden to carry because you might lose it — you hide it under the doormat every morning. No one else comes to the house except the mailman and Mrs. Collier, who cleans once a week. And me, but I’m no company even when I’m out of the basement.

Now we’re walking up 13th Street in the damp cool of the morning, past silent houses and empty yards. The steep ascent is no problem, we’re used to that, but we’re late as usual and have to hustle. Students with cars zip past us. Father says he won’t buy a car till you’re a senior. Then it will be a family car, not your car, but he’ll teach you to drive. He wants to toughen you up, and has given you a ratty third-hand set of golf clubs, with which you dutifully trudge around the links by yourself on weekends.

Doesn’t it seem a long time ago when the whole neighborhood gathered for hide and seek under the lilacs? Or when the kids came to your lawn for the croquet? In their early teens they all grew in different directions, joined other groups, left you behind. You’re an outcaste now, a bug in the margin of the big happy class book. Against all evidence, you have faith that school will someday end. After that you will get out of Dog River, go to New York or Paris. Or Berlin, where the crazies live.

Du bist verrückt, mein Kind.

Du mus’ fahren nach Berlin,

Wo die Verrückten sind.

La la, la la, la. Here’s the high school, a crouching monster with two mouths like doorways, one open, one shut. Yellow buses are unloading students from the Valley, most of them Nisei. Your old classmate Roku is not among them; he lives in town now, where his father has a store. Anyhow, he hangs around with the lettermen.

Three juniors are huddled on the lawn near the entrance. One of them, Red Nichols, says “Hi, Brain,” then seizes his own pants-leg, pulls it tight, and farts. The others laugh.

You go inside to your locker. Right 17, left 31, right 10. The multiple slamming of lockers reminds you of the movie last Saturday at the Rialto, when the vast German dreadnought echoed to the tread of marching men. A sudden explosion. White-uniformed officers are racing past. “Spurlos versenkt!” Red Nichols fails in his sailor suit, punctured by flying shrapnel. Black blood pours from his nose and mouth. He holds his arms up in mute appeal, but you step over him and follow the crowd into American History.

Mr. Mueller is talking about England at the time of the American Revolution. “And a loaf of bread cost only two dee.”

You raise your hand. “The d is for denarius. It’s pronounced ‘pence.’”

Mueller smiles with pleasure. “Well, I never heard that before.”

Later somebody passes you a note. “Draconian meeting changed to eleven o’clock.” The Draconian is the school magazine; it comes out twice a year. At eleven you get an excuse and a dirty look from Mr. Phillips. You’re failing algebra, not doing the homework, which means to Phillips that you’re lazy, but those strings of symbols are Chinese to you. You made a cartoon about that for the school newspaper, The Guide; it did not amuse Phillips, to whom algebra is as clear as the alphabet.

The Draconian staff was hand-picked by Miss Fessenden, and that’s why you are on it, although Dick Mayfield wishes you weren’t. He looks annoyed when he sees you come in. Dick is a big square-headed blond in a letterman’s sweater that has three stripes and two pins. The reason he is the editor is that he likes to run things.

You sit down next to Margaret Hicks, across from Heather Boyd and Virginia Copeland, both well-groomed seniors in pastel sweater sets and pearls.

“Well, I see we’re all here,” says Dick, “so let’s get started. Heather, do we have any new stuff to read?”

“No.”

“Okay. That’s actually good, because where we stand now, we have to turn in the whole magazine by next Friday, or the printer can’t do it before graduation week. That right, Heather?’

“Yes.”

“And, we only have sixteen pages to fill, and, what, twenty-two pages of stuff that we already decided we more or less like, not counting the contents page and my introduction that I haven’t written yet.”

“How long will the introduction be?” Virginia asks.

“Well, it depends what else is in the magazine, doesn’t it? Probably a page and a half, but I could keep it down to one page, easy. So, what the heck, call it one page for the introduction and one for the contents page, that means there’s room for fourteen pages of other stuff. So we’re eight pages over. You got the stories, Heather?” “No, I thought you had them.”

“Oh, sorry.” Dick reaches behind him, stretches easily to the bookshelf and brings back a manila folder. He opens it on the table. “Okay, here,” he says, holding up a manuscript you recognize as your own. He dangles it from one comer. “This thing I never did like, and it’s seven pages long, so there’s the problem practically solved. Any objections?”

“What didn’t you like, Dick?” Margaret asks.

“It’s crazy. Little naked people walking around on a star?” You clear your throat. “Jupiter isn’t a star.”

He gives you a can’t-believe-this look. “It isn’t? What is it then?”

“It’s a planet.”

Dick looks at the ceiling. Virginia says, “I kind of liked the little Jupiterians. I thought they were cute.”

After a moment Dick tosses the typescript onto the middle of the table and folds his arms. “Okay, tell me what you want to do.” Looked at the right way, he’s wearing a hangman’s noose that pushes his head to one side; he is dangling from a gibbet, cross-eyed, and his tongue is out.

“Let’s all copy down the names of the stories and poems and how many pages they are, and then mark the ones we think we should leave out,” Virginia says.

“Okay, fine, do it.” Dick hands the list to Virginia, who begins reading the titles aloud. You are so frozen with resentment that you put a mark beside your own story. Then the worst of the three poems, for a total of eight pages. But when Virginia tallies the votes, your story has survived. Missing are the two next-longest stories and one of the poems. That leaves two stories and two poems, and Dick’s introduction. It will be a sad little issue, just what everybody expects of The Draconian, but you are feeling a curious mixture of elation and guilt. Now your story will be part of the permanent record, where any scholar can dig it up and quote it indulgently when he writes his biography of you. Forty years ahead, when Dick Mayfield is still in jail for wife-beating and mopery.

At noon you take your lunch box out the back way to the slope above the bleachers, where if you lie flat in the grass you can’t be seen from the school above or the bleachers below. Through your mucosa I smell the cut grass, and I sample the sandwich while you eat it: white bread not quite stale, greasy margarine, lettuce, spiced baloney almost overripe.

For the hard-boiled egg you have salt and pepper shakers borrowed from the kitchen; Father would not approve if he knew, but he doesn’t, because you always put them back. The egg yolk is blue-green outside, and you’re thinking of a story you will never write, about a scientist who takes his vat-grown superchildren to another world, an empty blue-green world where they grow up wise and strong, but so godlike in intelligence that they can no longer be bothered talking to their creator. The title you are thinking of is “Promised Land.”

Then half a pickle, the emerald of vegetables.

IN THE AFTERNOON you get out of class again to work on the school paper. The Guide is put to bed on Tuesday, folded and mimeographed on Wednesday, distributed on Thursday. You type a stencil from a layout pasted up by Margaret. The stencil is a sandwich of backing sheet, cushion sheet (like angels’ toilet paper), and the blue waxy stencil itself on top. The type bar striking the stencil pushes the wax aside, leaving an impression through which the ink can ooze. When you type the wrong letter, you paint over it with correction fluid, wait for the fluid to dry, then type the right letter.

Fred Furlong, the editor, takes no part in these work sessions and is rarely seen in the Guide office, but today he looks in. “Miriam here?” Miriam Arnesen, the girls’ sports editor, a bovine blonde, is Fred’s girlfriend.

“Haven’t seen her.”

Fred comes farther into the room, smiling. He is a good-looking boy, dark-haired, wearing a beige cashmere sweater. “Matt, I hear you’ve got a good story coming up in the Draconian. Congratulations.”

“Thanks.”

“We ought to talk sometime. You want to come over after school today?”

“Uh, sure.”

“Here’s the address.” He hands you a card. “See you later.” He waves and is gone.

You have a feeling something is happening that you don’t understand. Fred is out of your class in two senses: he is a senior, two years ahead of you, and his family is one of the richest in Dog River. You have a box Brownie; Fred has a movie camera.

You go back to your typing, make two errors side by side, correct them badly. The center pops out of an o; the stencil is mined. You start another.

Miriam Arnesen comes in and deposits something in the wire basket. She is large and pink, with Valkyrie braids and pale eyelashes. “Have you seen Fred?” she asks.

“Yes, about half an hour ago. He was looking for you.”

Her smile is slow and placid. “Oh, well, he’ll find me.”

Suddenly you wonder: what if Fred gave you a false address, so that he and all his friends can laugh at you tomorrow? Your heart is thudding. “Miriam, do you know where Fred lives?”

“Sure.”

“What’s the address?”

“One ten Churchill. Why?”

“He asked me over there after school.”

“Mm.” The slow smile again. “He must really like you.”

“I don’t know why — what he wants.”

She shakes her head. The braids swing. “I don’t either. Why don’t you ask him? Bye-bye.”

When she is gone, you find Churchill Street in the Dog River map. It is on the ridge at the northwest end of town, about a mile from here.

At four o’clock you’re standing in front of your open locker, dithering about the lunch box. If you show up carrying it, you may look ridiculous, but if you leave it, there will be complicated adjustments to make. You take the lunch box with the feeling of a decision postponed.

At noon the sky was clear, but now the sun is only a yellow stain on a high blanket of cloud. The long parade of students thins out as it passes the Heights business section with its sandwich shops and candy stores. Presently you are walking alone.

Ahead of you the street rises gently to a ridge of low houses. You hide your lunch box in a culvert; you can pick it up on your way back.

One ten Churchill is at the top of the rise, a big gray one-story house, with white trim and black carriage lamps. Nowhere is there any sign of age or wear. Geraniums in green wooden planters are on the porch, azaleas in mulched beds in the lawn. A young maple has shed a few premature leaves. Two cars and a lawnmower are visible through the open garage doors. You step up on the porch, lift the brass door knocker and tap. Fred opens the door smiling. “You made it,” he says. “Come on in.” The living room has a waxed wooden floor, rag rugs, a beige davenport and armchair. Fred waves you to the chair, then drops on the davenport with his arms behind his head. He looks at you with a secret smile.

“You’re a loner, pretty much, aren’t you, Matt?”

“I guess.”

“No friends in school?”

“One or two. Not like your gang.”

Fred’s smile widens. “Those kind of friends. They hang around because I can take them on my father’s boat in Yachats. Or I buy them little things. It’s easy to make friends when you’ve got money.”

“I guess.”

Fred shifts on the davenport. “What will you do when you get out of school?”

“Go to New York. Be a cartoonist.”

“Seriously?”

“Maybe art school first.”

“I envy you. It’s college for me, then I go into Dad’s business. You know, anybody can add up numbers, but art is a gift, isn’t it? Suppose I offered you a whole lot of money, would you trade me your gift?”

You shake your head. “Money would be nice to have, but.”

“Too bad.” He stands up. “Like to see the house?”

You follow him through a house that is empty and silent. Dining room with a long polished table, sideboard, candles in a silver holder. Kitchen, yellow walls, black floor.

“Where is everybody?”

“Dad and Mom are in Seattle. Mandy’s home sick. She’s the cook. I’m on my own. Come on, I’ll show you something else.”

You go out through a recreation room — ping-pong table, dart board. Behind the house is a wide flagstone patio, then a little strip of lawn. Other houses, other back yards, are spread out below in descending tiers.

Fred reaches up to curl his fingers around a limb of the young oak near the edge of the lawn. A falling leaf hangs in midair. “Look,” he says.

Below, a silver skin of light covers the rooftops, the empty streets. You can see all the way to the horizon and beyond. Not a creature is stirring. The world has stopped, and it is empty. You think about the novel The Purple Cloud — what it would be like to be the last man on Earth.

All this I can give you, Fred says.

You look up at the sky for help, but no one is there.

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# 3. In the dark

It’s your life, Matt Kolb, not mine, though I follow you everywhere like a wraith on a string. I’m your invisible twin, your benchmark: I see you when you’re sleeping and I know when you’re awake. You’re snoring now in your overheated little studio apartment on Lexington Avenue. Your mouth is wide open; I’m sure I could see your tonsils if you had any.

Now you’re awake. You shower, shave, go down to the Greek’s for breakfast (two scrambled eggs, bacon, white toast). This is your ninth winter in New York, isn’t it, and what have you done with all those years? You lived on money from home, drew pulp illustrations of women in diaphanous draperies (five dollars apiece — they didn’t pay the rent); then you were an assistant editor at twenty-five dollars a week, then a reader for a literary agency, had an annulled marriage, and now you are a stripper in an offset platemaking shop. You’re traveling the wrong way on the rainbow, maybe, but you like this job because stripping (which doesn’t involve taking your clothes off) resembles the mimeography you used to do in high school, and because it gives you an appetite.

The platemaking shop is south of Canal, on a grim street of granite and wrought iron. Every morning, when you go there, you enter a big room with three glass-topped drafting tables along one wall, a fourth on the opposite side. Today the room is decorated with green and red crepe paper stapled around the walls; a scrawny Christmas tree cowers in the corner like December Morn. A radio is playing “All I Want for Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth.”

As you stand in the steamy warmth taking off your gloves and overcoat, you see that half a dozen people are already here. Lisa Gorman, one of the partners, is at her desk sorting envelopes and talking quietly to her gofer, Beth Bamforth. Lisa’s pink smock covers a multitude of bulges; Beth, who is young and willowy but long in the jaw, wears a violet wool dress. Jacob Stenzler, the badger-bearded chief stripper, is at his station on the left side of the room, and so are Tom and Rachel on the right.

Lisa’s business partner, Paul Trimm, a silent man who never seems to do anything but carpentry, stands by his workbench contemplating a piece of pine. His bulldog pipe is in his mouth. The shelves he builds always disappear into the platemaking room. How many shelves can they need back there?

As you hang up your coat, the door opens on a cold breeze; the platemakers, Angelo and Norman, enter together, slapping each other’s shoulders as if to brush off invisible snow, and crowd you a little as they take off their overcoats. Angelo is nineteen, smooth and muscular as a dolphin; Norman, curly-haired, is in his thirties. “Hallelujah, brother!” says Angelo. Then the two of them, arms around each other’s shoulders, dance like Dorothy and the Tin Woodman into the back room. Rachel Huffman, the new stripper, applauds; the rest look on without expression, except for Jacob, who exhales a cloud of pipe smoke as if there were a gnat in it.

Beth is handing out manila envelopes to the strippers. She puts two on Rachel’s table, three on yours, and gives you a pink smile. There is a bond between you> she is educated and believes you are too because of the way you talk. On your right, Tom Donnelly is sitting with his hands in his pockets, rumpled as usual, staring at his tabletop. Tom is a former partner in a platemaking shop, dumped long ago for some unknown disgrace. Today he looks as if he’s wearing yesterday’s shirt. He has steel-gray hair, not much of it, gray eyes, black-rimmed glasses. He’s a legend in this room. At the water cooler one day Lisa made some remark about his pot belly, and Tom replied, “I’ll put mine up against yours anytime, Lisa.”

“Everything okay?” you ask him.

He speaks out of the side of his mouth without turning his head. “I’m just sitting here saying ‘Shit.’”

“Buck up,” you say, “only ten more days to Christmas.”

Tom snorts. You flick the switch that illuminates your table, open your first envelope and look at the negatives. It’s a poster ad for a kitchen gadget; the headline, in transparent letters on the black background, reads:

SLICES ANYTHING!! ONLY $1.95!!!

You tape a sheet of yellow paper to the table and begin aligning the two negatives on it, one halftone-screened, the other not. You tape them down at the comers and begin cutting away part of each to make one composite negative that the boys in the back room will use to make the plate.

Rachel’s hands with their many bracelets are still in her lap. She is a handsome, high-colored young woman dressed today in purple and green. “Oh, boy, have I got a stummick cake,” she says. “I was to my brother’s on Long Guyland last night? I nevva shoulda ate the asparagus, it makes me bilious.”

You offer her a Tum. “Would this help?”

“Maybe, if I took the whole bottle.” A funny catch in her voice where the double t in “bottle” should be.

When Rachel goes to the water cooler with her tablet, Beth leans down to you confidentially. “Did you hear the glottal stop?” she asks, smiling. She puts the same funny pop in the middle of “glottal.” You don’t know how to reply: what is a glottal stop, exactly?

When Rachel gets up again, you try several times to reproduce the word as she spoke it. Tom rumbles, “Something wrong with your goddam throat today, I guess.”

“No.”

“Want some advice?”

“Sure.”

“Put a sock in it.”

You turn the yellow paper, tape it down again, and cut away the center portion. There are still a few transparent specks on the negative. You dab them with opaquing fluid; it is violet-brown, redder when it dries. You drop the finished job in your out basket and pick up another envelope.

Rachel is back, cautiously cutting her yellow paper. An exclamation; she sucks a broken fingernail. Angelo appears from the back room wearing what at first looks like a gray wig, but is in reality the head of a dirty mop held behind him by Norman. The radio is playing Jingle Bells; Angelo turns it off, then strikes an attitude with one hand on his heart and the other extended toward Jacob Stenzler. He sings,

Some farblondjet evening, you will meet a Stenzler.

You will meet a Stenzler across a crowded room.

And somehow you’ll know, you’ll know even then,

That somewhere you’ll meet him again and again.

Rachel is red-faced with suppressed laughter; Jacob and Lisa look gloomy. Beth at her station and Paul at his workbench seem bewildered.

Angelo bows repeatedly. “Thank you, thank you, you are so kind.” He kisses his fingers, waves them right and left; then he and Norman disappear through the doorway. Lisa and Beth are deep in conversation. Perhaps Angelo has gone too far this time; but after all, it’s Christmas.

You go to the toilet, a malodorous closet built of gypsum board. Inside, on one wall an untrained artist has drawn the outline of a naked woman; some critic has scraped away the whole crotch with a knife blade. On the opposite wall a quatrain has been censored in the same way:

Those who write on bathroom walls

roll their in little balls

and those who read these lines of wit

eat those little balls of!!

You target two floating cigaret butts, pull the chain and send them whirling down to darkness. Where will they end up, in Australia, spinning clockwise?

In the afternoon Beth brings you an old set of negatives; it looks like something that has been in the files for years. The red dots of the opaquing are childish, splattered at random, sometimes overlapping the halftone. You show it to Tom, laughing. “Look at this!”

He leans closer. “Keep your trap shut. That’s her work — Lisa did those.” You glance at Lisa. She is not looking at you and her expression tells you nothing, but you know she has heard.

Angelo emerges again with his mop wig held by Norman. Flinging out his arms to Lisa and Beth, he sings,

Now Betty was a servant maid

And she a place had got

To wait upon two ladies fair.

These ladies’ name was Scott.

Now Bett a certain talent had,

She anything could handle,

And for these ladies every night

She used a large thick candle.

Lisa’s face is pale. Angelo bows, kisses his fingers and retreats, followed by Norman. From the back room their voices can be heard in close harmony:

We two queens of Orient are…

Paul turns the radio on; it comes to life in the middle of Joy to the World, with chimes. You’re thinking that you haven’t bought a card to send to your parents at home; better do that tomorrow. Something nonsectarian and cheery, with a note, “Thanks for the check.”

At four o’clock Beth distributes the pay envelopes. Yours, opened, disgorges two tens, a five, three singles, a quarter, a dime, and a buffalo nickel. Tom counts his money, then leans over to you. “Let’s whoop it up tonight,” he growls. “My wife is supposed to meet me at Leary’s. We’ll get something to eat, then do the bars. Are you game?”

This is the first time anyone in the shop has invited you anywhere. “Where’s Leafy’s?”

“Stick with me, I’ll take you. It’s a crummy place, but the roast beef is good.”

At the end of the day, when people are standing up getting their coats, Rachel still sits at her table with three unopened envelopes. You hear her mutter, “Why did I take this rotten job?”

“You’ll get the hang of it,” you tell her. She does not reply. You think, maybe she’s lonesome and would like to be invited to dinner; too late now.

You walk with Tom northward up the dark street toward a pink sky-glow. Tom is shorter than you; his pork-pie hat is pulled down over his eyes and his hands are in his pockets. Snow crystals around the two of you in the air are so fine that they are visible only in the street lights, but you can feel them melting on your lips. The sensation makes you feel closer to Tom, although neither of you speaks.

You pass a dry cleaner’s, closed, then a corner drugstore, open, but its lights go out as you pass. Then the bars on Canal Street. Leary’s is a dark, narrow beer-smelling place with a row of tables in the back. A jukebox is racketing out “The Yellow Rose of Texas.” The withered gray woman at one of the tables turns out to be Tom’s wife, Myra. She looks ten years older than Tom; the only color in her face is the pink tip of her nose. “Glad to meet you,” she says almost inaudibly. Her fingers are narrow and chilly.

Tom looks happy to be here, comfortable with the beer fumes and the noise. He says, “Tonight is on us, Matt, so the sky’s the limit. We got a little Christmas present from a lawyer, can you beat that? Not enough to buy a bond, too much to throw in the gutter, so we’re going to spend it on drink.”

Tom orders roast beef dinners for himself and Myra. You order corned beef and cabbage, a glass of milk, and a slice of chocolate cream pie. The corned beef is greasy; you eat potatoes and bread to soak it up. Tom is drinking a rye highball with his meal, and Myra has a cocktail with a cherry in it.

You are beginning to wonder what you’ve let yourself in for. You have never been able to afford whisky and have no head for it, but you have never been able to swill beer either. Can you buy an empty jug to pour it into? “I’m saving this for later”?

The next bar has a dance floor and is thumping with a polka. Your beer comes in a stein; it is flat and almost too cold to drink. Tom says in your ear, “Are you having fun? Had any good lays lately?”

All these places seem to be full of the same yellow light. The fourth bar has a piano player doing fancy runs at the end of every phrase, and there is a cover charge. Myra leans thoughtfully over her drink; she has not spoken since she said “Glad to meet you.” Tom beckons you closer. “Know something, we used to have a kid. I ever tell you that? Put’m in a military school. In Virginia. It cost an arm and a leg every year to send’m there. Not counting the extras.” He taps you on the arm with two stiff fingers. “You know what that kid did? He shot himself. Put a bullet in’s rifle and pulled the trigger with his toe. How you like that?”

“Oh, Jesus, Tom.”

“Never mind. Drink up. You still drinking that damn beer? Have a shot of whisky, God damn it. Put hair on your chest.” You order the shot. It is warming after the beer, and makes you feel remote from all disgrace and discomfort.

Tom pays the checks with a sprawl of dollar bills taken from his pocket. Between bars you walk in a close threesome, stumbling and swaying, with Myra in the middle. Her sharp shoulder strikes your ribs in the same place every time. She seems to be singing quietly, but you can’t make out the words or the tune.

Later, you sit in a row on the cane seat. Tom’s and Myra’s heads rock with the swaying of the car. The train emerges from underground, and you cross a bridge across an unknown river. Beyond in the blackness, isolated lights wink like the cottage candles of the damned. You have no idea where you are.

Down the stairs, swaying together on an empty sidewalk, then up another stairway smelling of damp. Tom unlocks the door into a railroad apartment: the first room is the kitchen. He turns on the light over the stove. “Take coat off,” he says. “Just a sec.” Myra has gone through into the next room and is sitting on a dark couch.

You stand in the doorway, not knowing how to get past Tom. Tom gets eggs from the refrigerator, breaks them into a bowl. He puts an iron skillet on the stove.

After a while you realize that he has not moved for a long time. He is standing in front of the stove, swaying a little, head bowed and jaw hanging, as if he has forgotten what eggs are and what a stove is. Myra watches him sphinx-eyed from the other room.

You back away, try to close the door, but the knob slips through your fingers and you can still see into the yellow glow of the kitchen. To your right, a door opens on another yellow kitchen and another motionless Tom. Another just like it opens on your left. You turn and see a fourth room spring to light behind you. Four kitchens, four Toms. Then, one at a time and in the same order, they go out. And you’re alone in the dark.

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# 4. The willows

This is your life, Matt Kolb, and I’m still the murdered twin who follows you around, although in the ripeness of your age you live in France, five thousand miles from Oregon and the basement where my little bones are buried. The lawn and garden are dead like me, the cherry trees have been cut down and the house trashed by renters, but nobody has dug me up yet.

You’re an old party now, and your well-trimmed white beard, you believe, is esthetically pleasing because it balances the bald dome of your skull. In general, the French consider beards unhygienic, but yours reminds them of Colonel Sanders and Wild Bill Hickock. They think of you as a monument, an avant-garde Old West author, and they hang around you at cocktail parties to hear what outrageous or ignorant thing you may come out with next.

It’s the spring of 1998, a good year for the dollar, and you’ve been traveling down the Rhône valley in a rented Opel with your son Arthur and his wife. Arthur is a chemist; he started manufacturing industrial essences ten years ago and is getting very rich. Sharon owns a chain of hardware stores in Los Angeles and is rich too. They have a little daughter, Melissa, left behind with Sharon’s mother because she developed a sniffle at the last minute. Sharon keeps in touch by cell phone.

Sharon is all soft curves, soft sweaters, wavy hair in a French bun, but occasionally you get a glimpse inside and she is keen as a knife. You have the feeling that she is still taking your measure. Sometimes she calls you “Papa,” because she thinks you’re trying to look like Hemingway. She doesn’t wear jewelry, except for a gold wedding band, and neither does Arthur. They don’t dress for ostentation, no rings, no Patek Phillipe watches.

Arthur is a casualty of your first divorce. He thinks if he discovers the trick of getting close to you, he may gain the important father-son bonding he missed when he was a child. Sometimes he believes the breakup of that marriage was your fault and sometimes he blames his mother. He and Sharon are in therapy, jointly and singly.

Now you’re pulling off the highway into downtown Aix-en-Provence. When Arthur finds out how the name is pronounced, he starts calling it “Aches and Pains,” but he doesn’t mean it, and he’s cheerful, glad to get out of the Opel and stretch his legs. You leave the car in a parking lot and stroll back to the Cours Mirabeau, a beautiful tree-shaded boulevard that is quiet and peaceful this morning. You three sit around a sidewalk table and order the fruits de met, little mollusks displayed in a pyramid, every color from primrose to violet, each more delectable than the last. Arthur holds them close to his big nostrils before he eats them. “Esters and terpenes,” he says. “Mm.”

“Could you duplicate that in the laboratory, Arthur?”

“Never. The food here is something else, Dad. How do they do it?”

“Cuisine, and the fresh ingredients. You can’t get anything like this in Paris, even if the chef is Provençal.”

A young woman at a table near yours closes her eyes every time she puts a forkful of something wonderful in her mouth. You’re thinking you would like to live here and eat nothing but Provençal food, but then would you lose the contrast?

After lunch you walk over to the center of town and do the shops. Sharon buys a few scarves, Arthur some knitted neckties and hand-carved swizzle-sticks, just to be buying something. You find a necklace of semiprecious stones that takes your fancy. Then you check in at the hotel south of town. Arthur announces that he wants a nap. You leave him in the room and invite Sharon down to the patio for a drink, but she doesn’t want wine or liquor. She orders a vanilla ice cream.

“Everything all right?” you ask.

She stirs the ice cream with a spoon. “Arthur wants a trial separation.”

“Oh, dear. What about you?”

“Trial separations usually turn into divorces, don’t you think? You were divorced, and now it’s our turn. What about your parents, were they divorced?”

“No.”

“Mine were. My shrink says I’m convinced that any man I love will leave me sooner or later, and I always make sure it’s sooner so I can be in control.”

“Do you believe that?”

“I guess so. Life is a bitch, isn’t it?”

“Very often. It’s the only one we’ve got.” You’re looking back over your life as a rounded whole, an egg-shape that means something, but how can you tell her that?

In your pocket is the necklace you bought earlier, teardrops of semiprecious stones on a silver chain, agate, jasper, tiger’s eye, amber, moonstone, and a few things you don’t recognize, clear colors, smooth to the fingers. “I don’t know who I bought this for,” you say. “I don’t suppose it’s your kind of thing.”

“I’ll wear it anyway.” She holds out her hand and smiles. “Thanks, Papa.”

In the afternoon you do the museums. Arthur and Sharon are subdued. They look at the tapestries without comment, and seem to avoid standing too close to each other. If they have had a quarrel, it hasn’t cleared the air. Then a famous restaurant for the lamb chops ŕ l’arlésienne, not bad but overpriced and overpresented. Arthur and Sharon are glum.

The next day, very early in the morning, you resign yourself to wakefulness, get dressed and walk out alone down toward the river. The air is cool and moist. Birds are singing in the luminous sky. The sun is veiled by a drift of cloud; below it you can see the bright spark of Saturn enthroned. As you pass a stand of willows, you notice someone standing there. It’s your father just as you remember him, in his gold-framed spectacles and the gold chain looping across his vest. He’s holding his staghorn jackknife with the big blade extended. He looks down at you from his great height and says, “I want you to remember this, Matthew.”

You move closer. “What, Father?”

“Watch closely.” He slices through a willow shoot. He trims it to a clear straight section about four inches long, and drops the extra pieces on the ground.

“The right time to do it is in the spring when the sap is running,” he says. “Feel here.” You touch the cut end of the shoot; it is moist and cool, like a piece of cheese.

He takes the piece back and cuts off a diagonal slice from the end, making it resemble the mouthpiece of a flute. “This is the hard part,” he says. “If you break the bark, you have to start over.” He works the blade of his knife under the bark, around and around, until he has loosened it and can slip it off in one piece. He moves the bark tube up and down to show you, then puts it back in place with a little bare wood at the far end. Now he cuts a shallow groove near the top of the mouthpiece. “This is the airhole.”

“You never let me do that myself, Father.”

“Watch.” He takes the bark tube off again and cuts a sliver of wood from the top of the mouthpiece. “Be parsimonious, you can always cut more.” He puts the bark on again and blows into the whistle. A resonant honk comes out.

“Is that it?” you ask.

“That’s all.”

“Father, I never learned that, and I never taught Arthur.”

“It’s a dying art.” You notice that he is coming slowly nearer without moving. His head and body are growing larger and at the same time sinking into the ground like an elevator. “Tempus edax return,” he says. Time devours all things. Now he’s just a head, but it is like Humpty Dumpty’s, taller than you are, and as it moves toward you his mouth opens into a cavern and you’re falling at last into the leaf-mold darkness where I live.

Here we are. Welcome home, brother.

“The only difference between you and me, Flanders, is that I read the homework before I ate it.”