

# Obscene Callers

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That day, the day I'm thinking about, I was sitting at my breakfast table alone. It was a bright Saturday morning in summer and I had some things to account for to myself. For one thing, I'd already been in that town three years. And, to be honest, "town" is stretching the meaning of the word: It had about twenty thousand people and about two bars per person and there was a lake nearby full of fish you couldn't eat without poisoning yourself. That isn't a town in my book. For another thing, my husband, Bucky, had run off two months before with this woman from around there. I won't reveal her name, but she had fake blond hair, wore her blue jeans like hands grabbing her butt, was no more than twenty-five, and was looking for trouble. And that's exactly what she got in Bucky Gilman. The only other thing I had to account for was that I turned forty that day. Nothing much, except that forty was precisely two years past half my life expectancy, and not a pretty idea. These are thoughts that bright days and breakfast tables bring home to a person.

Bucky had made the breakfast table, which was one reason you couldn't touch the top of it without spilling your coffee. It was so unsteady I had to keep folding junk mail under the legs to even things up, though no matter what I did, the table turned out unsteady. It was a meaningful table. I'd been married to Bucky for ten years, nine of them pure torture and one of them worse. I was sitting at his table, thinking all these things and wondering what was next. I thought maybe I'd pack up the apartment and go someplace a little different, go to a real town, for instance, where good things could happen to a person for a change. Wishful thinking, though forty is an age where balancing the good and the bad makes a lot of sense. I had a job up at the speedway in the ticket booths, decent work except it closed during the winter and there was no way you could look at it as a place where I explored my personal career potential, like they say in the ladies' magazines. My personal career potential was zip at the speedway, although it paid the rent and that's the bottom line those magazines don't mention. You read that stuff for too long and you start thinking everybody in America is two steps ahead of you and you don't have a prayer. But, like I said, it paid the rent. No one can hate that.

I'd just about decided to call in sick to work, it being my birthday, when the phone rang. I figured it was Granby at the speedway calling to ask me to work an extra shift, which would figure since I'd gotten used to getting just exactly what I didn't want. For a second I thought about not answering, but the fact was, I couldn't be sick and not home both. So I answered it; I said, "Yes, what is it you want?" I've never been one for the Good-morning-Gilman-

residence bit, just another bone of contention between Bucky and me. That one with the fake hair and the tight blue jeans would be perfect for it is all I can say, if he ever marries her, which he won't.

There was silence on the other end of the connection, so I said "What is it?" again and waited. Then the guy on the line started murmuring, a kind of low, awful rumble that made me think whoever it was, was sick or something. And I was right. It took me a while to figure out where the chips were falling, but I finally did.

"Then cut it off and use it for a doorstop, you shithead," I yelled, then I slammed down the phone, hard. There's no need to tell what he said, though it was language I don't appreciate from anybody, not nobody, especially not some sick old bastard like this guy was. I don't mind saying it scared me a little bit. Maybe it scared me a lot. I got to thinking about how I was forty now and not as quick as I used to be, about how anybody and his brother could crash into my apartment and beat me senseless with a broomstick, or worse. I got to thinking I was there in the apartment all alone and that wasn't a good place to be. I wanted to wring Bucky's neck. I wanted to wring the phone's neck, though when I looked at it, it already looked wrung, the cord twisted crazily around the receiver like a rat's tail. It was upsetting, and the more I thought about it, the more upset I got. I sat back down at the breakfast table, put my elbows on it, but when it rocked toward me I jumped, just as if somebody had tapped me on the shoulder. I was a little upset and that's a fact.

The way I see it, you're at the mercy of anybody who phones you, just one reason you don't have to be polite about it. But an obscene phone call is different. When you're in a bad spot, it means something worse is just around the corner. All of a sudden those ten years with Bucky looked like decent ones. My mother always said the assholes you know are better than the ones you don't; she knew a thing or two, except she's dead now. I thought maybe I'd get up and lock my door, then I thought that was stupid: Any maniac knew how to break down a door. I wondered if this obscene maniac knew where I lived. The table top kept rocking back and forth and I couldn't tell whether it was because of me or whether it was Bucky's crazy construction - there was no telling where the fault lay, except the table kept rocking. I was almost in tears, just from not knowing anything.

He walked by the window when I was feeling that way. I looked out the window, then the table rocked forward and I thought, There's the only man on earth I know didn't make that call. It was a simple thought, but it had the beauty of being true and made me feel as though I had company coming over, as though things might get better and forty was a hell of a lot better than dead. I leaned over and rapped the window with my knuckles. He stopped on the sidewalk, looking around, his lunch pail swinging back and forth on its handle. I gave another good rap or two, then he saw where I was. His square face was full of confusion, but it was friendly confusion, the way a smart dog looks at you when you talk baby-talk to it. I waved my hand at him in a festive way. He waved back, still looking confused, the bottom of his lunch pail glinting in the sun, then he turned around and moved on down the sidewalk. I watched him go, thinking he looked pretty good, real good, like a guy who could get rid of trouble faster than he could get into it. There aren't but a handful of men who look like that, and that's God's truth.

The best part was, I knew who he was and where he lived. He lived in the apartment building next door to mine, he worked for the nuclear power plant up on the lakebed doing nobody knew what, like everybody else who worked there - and his name was Grover. Grover Littlefield. I knew all this because of a fishing pole. One day in May I'd answered my doorbell and a parcel post man stood on the walkway, holding on to a long, thin box. This was about three weeks after Bucky had run off, so when I saw the guy my heart gave a little leap; I figured if Bucky was still ordering things to the apartment, he might come back, might be on some kind of lark that he knew all along would soon go bad. But fat chance, nothing turns out. What did turn out was that the parcel post man had come to the wrong apartment building.

"You got a Grover Littlefield here?" the guy wanted to know.

"Hell," I said, "I don't even have a husband here." I wasn't in the mood to be cheery. The guy just looked at me, scratching his head. It seems like every parcel post man in the world has an itch under his hat. They're always scratching.

"Says here there's a Littlefield," he said and showed me the address slip to prove himself, though I didn't look at it. "One-oh-eight and that's this."

"This," I told him, "hasn't got any Littlefields."

That irritated him, I could tell, but he didn't say anything about it, must have seen my face, which felt like it was coming unstuck and falling onto the concrete of the walkway. Bucky was an asshole, no doubt about it, except I didn't know anything better than wanting him to come back.

"Look, ma'am," the guy said and quit scratching, put the box out in front of me like a present. "All I know is I've got a name and an address and a fishing rod right here and they all of them have to shake hands by the end of the day. One-oh-eight is what I've got. It's from a Littlefield in Georgia," he said hopefully, as though that might clear things up.

"Georgia," I said. "God Almighty. Let me look at the address." He handed it over and I looked at it. Right away I knew it was the wrong building, though something about the writing caught my eye. Grover Littlefield and I lived cater corner on Ontario Street and the Littlefield in Georgia had drawn a tiny picture of Lake Ontario beside that part of the address. He'd also drawn a picture of a fishing pole that stretched out across about half of his picture of the lake. There was even a drawing of a little cornfield beside the name. "Cute," I said. "Southern Indians with fishing poles. I swear to God. Littlefield. That sound Indian to you?"

"Frankly," he said, "it could say Jacksquatch and I'd have to deliver it."

I told him where he needed to go, almost invited him in for coffee, I was feeling that low, but he was so grateful for the right address I knew he was in a hurry to get his job done. Sometimes I got that way myself at the ticket booths at the speedway: stiff and efficient as all

get out. Even sorry jobs have a certain amount of personal career potential, I guess, though there are better things in life.

A few days later I was walking down a sidewalk in town when I heard a screech of tires so close I thought I was a goner. It was that parcel post man, leaning out of the door of his truck.

"You scared me to death," I called, not so much mad as relieved, considering how many drunk drivers there were around there. You wouldn't believe how dangerous it was to walk down the sidewalks in that town after five o'clock. It was high noon all the time, after five o'clock. "You were right," he called out. "Right about what?" I walked over to his truck, taking my time even though some horns had started honking. I'll accommodate myself to anybody who stops traffic for me. "He is an Indian, or at least partway. He took that box with the fishing rod, looked at the address, and just laughed. Just laughed and laughed. I've never seen a happier guy. Over an old fishing pole. I saw him take it out. It was old."

"That's nice," I said, wondering what the point was and watching a car swerve around the truck toward the intersection.

"That's him," he said, all excited, and I looked where he was looking. "That's why I stopped. It was too perfect, seeing you and him at the same time. I'm telling you, that's him." Parcel post men are strange, but they're good with faces, I'll give them that. Maybe this one was just grateful to me for setting him straight that time. I looked at Grover Littlefield. He was half a block away, stopping at shop windows and staring at things. He was tall, as tall as most of the shop windows. He was tanned, too, except you could tell it wasn't a tan that came from the sun but from something almost as old as that. And he was handsome, the way some furniture is handsome, chiseled out somehow. He was around thirty years old, an age I knew well, having been through it before.

"Well," I said, "that's one good-looking partway Indian.

"Get this," the guy said. "He works for the nuke plant. An Indian at a nuke plant. It beats all."

"It does. It beats all." I gave a mean look to some guy in a Pontiac behind the truck who kept leaning on his horn.

"I'll bet he isn't married," he said. "I'll bet you he isn't even engaged. "

"Nice to see you," I told him, backing away, embarrassed all of a sudden. "Thanks," I said. Then the parcel post man switched gears in the truck, made the tires squeal, and I never saw him again.

All of this went through my head while I rapped on the window. Grover Littlefield had just happened to walk by, though I saw it was a good omen. Anything is a good omen when you need it to be. Right then this plan unfolded like a clean sheet in my mind, just as if it had been waiting there for years to snap itself open.

I called Granby at work and said I was sick, said I was too sick to come to work that day. I made my voice sound pitiful. "Female trouble," he said in a nasty way, which was the only way he could be. The walls of his office at the speedway had posters of naked women spread out awkwardly over the hoods of super-modifieds, and anytime you went in there, he made sure he stood in front of one of them while he talked to you. Whenever I thought about Granby I saw his ferrety face with the breasts of some poster woman sticking up behind his head like fat devil's horns. "I'll get Maureen to come in," he said, "but your ass better be behind the counter tomorrow. I've got a speedway to run, not a goddamn whorehouse. I'm hiring men from now on, that's all, no fucking females." Maureen was his wife, a big-boned woman who, at least once to my knowledge, had knocked Granby cold in an altercation involving some missing receipts. He'd been in the hospital for two days. His grease-monkey friends brought him posters of naked women and cars by the fistful, like flowers, until the nurses on his floor at the hospital threatened to go on strike if all that stuff didn't get taken out of there. I told him fine, OK, I'd be there tomorrow. Then I hung up and got busy.

The cake was the hardest part. I kept opening the oven every five minutes to see what was happening, couldn't leave it alone, so of course the cake fell. What I did was, I baked another one, only this time I tried to make it fall, which is harder to do for some reason, though I did it. When I stacked the two on top of each other, they looked just about right, and with icing all over it, the whole thing looked exactly right. The chocolate was as peaked and dimpled as the face of the moon, a fine-looking cake.

I took some time dressing. At first I put on some clingy polyester pants and a nice print shirt, but they were too dressy and made me look like I was forty, which was ten years older than I felt I deserved to be. Finally I decided on jeans with a cotton smock, red leather sandals on my feet. I'd kept my figure pretty well. If I held my breath, I was about the size I'd been at twenty-five. Whatever happened when I wasn't holding my breath, the smock would cover up.

Around five-thirty I went over. My sandals made sucking sounds on the hot pavement, the cake smelled of butter and chocolate and weighed about ten pounds. I felt proud of the cake, kept hefting it in my hands. Way down the street, squared by the municipal buildings, I could see a piece of Lake Ontario, green at the bottom of the square and going to blue where it met the sky, crisscrossed all over by telephone wires. Seeing the lake made me think it might not be such a bad town, when you discounted everything else about the place.

Grover Littlefield's apartment was on the ground floor, next to the street, just like mine was. In fact, our apartment buildings were identical, all the doors opening up onto the parking lot, all the windows made so that you couldn't open them, the buildings slapped together in about three months during the boom that had come when the nuclear plants started construction. There were three of them around there, which has to be some kind of crazy record. All I could think was, the power plants had better be built with more sense than these apartment buildings, or else everybody around here is a goner. Bucky once said that nothing on earth was safer than nuclear power, which was a crock and I told him so. "I can think of ten different things that are safe," I said. "Nuclear power ain't one of them and another one ain't you." I already knew he might be fooling around. I wondered where he was right then, what

he'd do if he saw me holding a cake in front of Grover Littlefield's apartment, holding that thing and my breath, too. It was a sight I'd have paid admission to see.

I stood in front of his door for a while, figuring out how to knock with the cake in my hands. Finally I just set it down beside the door. Out in the parking lot a seagull made what sounded like a series of hacking coughs, and I suddenly realized I didn't know what the hell I was doing there or why I was doing it or what might come next. I knocked twice on the door, fast, before something worse came over me, then I picked up the cake and stood there, smiling for all I was worth.

Grover Littlefield opened the door wide, a big smile on his face, too, though it turned into something else when he saw me, a sort of smile with its breath knocked out. He looked at the cake, then back inside his apartment, as if there might be people with party hats about to jump out from behind the furniture. He had on a black T-shirt that said GO FOR IT and jeans that looked so worn they were almost white, but his face, framed in the doorway, was something that made me hold my breath without thinking about it. My God, it was a good face. It was a face that might have done push-ups, strong and hard and smooth, a face that told you it looked that way because whatever was behind it was in just as good shape. I don't mind saying I loved him at that moment. I don't mind saying that at all.

"Do I know you?" he asked, pulling the neck of his T-shirt with one finger. He stared at the cake, then back at me.

"Oh, no," I said and gave a little laugh. It was a snort, not a laugh, but I couldn't help myself. "I'm just a social caller. I mean, I'm just visiting. Since I knew I was coming, I baked a cake." I snorted again, then held up the cake for him to see it better. "It's my birthday and everything."

"Jerry!" he called out, laughing hard all of a sudden. "Jerry, where are you, you son of a bitch!" He leaned past my shoulder and looked around, his laughter a nice sound, like the hooves of horses pounding grass. There wasn't anything out there, nothing but the walkway and the parking lot and maybe some seagulls. "Jerry?" he asked, straightening up. He quit laughing.

"Honest to God," I said, "I'm just visiting. I saw you outside my window this morning. Remember? I knocked on my window and you turned around and waved. Remember?"

"I guess so." For a while he pulled on the neckline of his T-shirt, as if his breathing had something wrong with it. His eyes were exactly the color of the chocolate icing. I could still smell all that butter as well as something even richer, which might have been him. "You say I waved?" he asked.

"Sure you waved. You stood on the sidewalk and waved. I'm a hundred percent sure on that you waved. Listen, could I set this cake down? It weighs as much as a two-year-old."

"I guess so," he said, though he didn't move, expecting, I guess, for me to set it down right there on the doorstep. Instead I said, "Great!" and moved around him into the apartment. It was a bold move, at least it was for me, one that had my heart pausing for so long I felt maybe I'd left it outside in the parking lot. You might think your heart always pounds like a jackhammer in big moments, but you'd be wrong.

"Nice place," I said, which was a lie. I had to throw some clothes on the floor to set the cake down on the coffee table. "Listen," I said, "my name's Dale," which was the sorry truth and my mother's fault. "I'm real glad to know you. I mean, it was real nice of you to wave and everything." He was standing in the doorway, this time with his back to the outside, standing there and looking like he had some things on his mind.

"Can I sit down on this couch?" I asked, trying to stir up his attention a little.

"OK," he said, and I did, right then. "But let me get this straight. Are you trying to sell this cake or give it to me or, just what all is this business with the cake?" He came into the living room, then stood over the cake, putting it square between us like an argument.

"It's a present, you know, a sort of calling card. Like a bunch of flowers, like a casserole, like a - Frankly, I don't know what the hell it's like. It's a cake. I'm giving you a cake."

"Oh," he said, as though that was all he needed to know. "Grover, Grover Littlefield. Pleased to meet you." He stood behind the cake, holding a thumb toward his chest as if he were pointing himself out in a crowd. "I never had a cake give me before."

"That's all right," I said, giving him a smile. "I never baked one before."

"Well, Dale." He squatted in front of the cake, the way he might have squatted in front of a stream full of fish out in the woods. "It smells real good. That's always a good sign."

"It's the butter. That and the chocolate. We're talking cardiac alley right down the middle of that cake, but I figure, what I figure is, you can't cut yourself off from all the pleasures in life. I had a friend that wouldn't eat anything but celery and carrots. Day after day it was celery and carrots. I'm telling you, she was one unhappy woman."

"That's right," he said and grinned, pointing to his T-shirt. "That's my philosophy on life in a nutshell." He held the grin for a while longer. He was the smoothest man I'd ever seen - not a hair you could see anywhere except on top of his head, where it was as dark and thick as a mink stole. Bucky had been hairy just about everywhere, hairy as a pink-bottomed baboon.

"I appreciate the cake there, Dale. What do you want me to do with the plate when I'm finished?" He stood up, as though he were already finished with something.

"Keep it, it's just an old five-and-dime thing. But say," I said, maybe a little too quickly, "why don't we have us a piece right now? I haven't tasted it myself."

"I'd love to do that. I sure would, Dale, sit here and eat a piece of cake and all that. But I've got a fishing trip lined up this evening. Jerry, my friend Jerry and me, we've got a trip all planned. There's walleyes with our names on them out there. Or I would. I sure would."

"Oh," I said, thinking fast. "That's exactly why I came over. It's an amazing coincidence, but that's one big reason I came over." I told him about the parcel post man and the fishing pole, at least the parts I wanted him to know. Then, for some reason, I got creative. I told him about how my father - I kept calling him Daddy in front of Grover Littlefield - how my daddy used to take me fishing every Sunday of the spring and summer. I told him about how my daddy would stand on the bank of a lake for hours, telling me about the fish we neither of us could see and only caught once in a while. There were fish, I said he'd said, that looked like hammers and screwdrivers down there, whole toolboxes of fish. I went on and on about what my daddy had said. It was a pack of lies, though it could have been true, and should have been. The only thing my father had done with me, that I could remember, was play checkers every once in a while, but he threw the board on the floor every time he lost. It was as family oriented as he got, which was pretty good for the kind of man he was. Some men just don't know how to act with a kid. ----> "So the upshot is," I told Grover Littlefield, "I'd like to go fishing sometime and I figured you were somebody I could do it with. I'll bet you there're some walleyed bastards out there with my name on them, too." I was trying to sound like one of the guys, so he'd know I could fit in and make do if I had to. The truth was, I didn't know a walleye from a waterbug; all I knew about fishing was that you had to throw something in to get something out and that, come to think of it, was exactly what I was doing on Grover Littlefield's couch with a cake in front of me. "So what do you think? Do you think old Jerry would go for it? Do you think I could try my hand at this thing or not?"

"Jesus, Dale," he said. "I don't know about this. I don't know about this at all." He stood there, scratching his head just like the parcel post man, staring down on the cake as if it were still the issue under discussion. He looked good doing it, too, as good as a man can look when you're hoping for something from him. "Jesus," he said. "I don't know. Do you have a rod and everything?"

"No, I don't, I'm sorry to say. I lost it when I moved up here. Either that or I broke it, I don't remember which. Don't you have more than one? I figure, what with that pole you got in the mail and everything, I figure you've got more than one. Don't you? Don't you have more than one?" I had to stop myself after that, mostly because I wasn't breathing correctly when I said it all, I was talking so fast. The sad truth is, sometimes you find yourself being pathetic and all you can do is hope nobody else knows what you know, which is that you're being as pitiful as they come.

"Well," he said, his eyes on the cake, "I guess it's all right. I don't know what Jerry'll say, but I guess it's all right, being that you really want to and your dad being what he was. I guess so. Boy," he said, shaking his head, "I don't know about this. This is something."

"Great!" I said and stood up, staring at the cake since that's what he was doing. "Great! I'll run home and be right back. Should I get some cold cuts or some hamburger or anything? Pack a picnic or something? This is great. Maybe some charcoal and a grill? What?" I don't

mind saying I felt crazy right then, crazy with something that was just about the opposite of always wondering what was next; that might have been the exact opposite of turning forty or having your husband leave you or having somebody give you an obscene phone call that made you wonder whether your doors were locked, your life was in order. I was crazy with it all. "You name it in the food department and I'll get it," I said.

"No," said Grover Littlefield. "We don't need a thing. We fry up some of the fish we catch." He shook his head, looking at the cake, shaking his head like a pretty dog clearing flies. "I don't guess there's a thing we need from you.

They were standing by a beat-up Chevy pickup when I came back. I'd changed my shoes, thrown the sandals across the room and pulled on my sneakers as though my life depended on it. I figured the jeans and smock were just fine for a fishing trip, although I was moving so fast I don't know if I was figuring things out at all. It had taken maybe six minutes for me to sprint to my apartment, put on the sneakers, then sprint back again. I was gasping like a fish by the time I got up to them and probably looked a little walleyed, too. I didn't know but what they might leave me behind, if I made myself late.

Right from the start I didn't like Jerry's looks. It wasn't just wanting Grover Littlefield to myself, either, even though that might have crossed my mind. Being behind the ticket booths at the speedway had given me more people sense. I could tell some things. I could tell who was a tourist just passing through, who was a gambler willing to sell his fingers for a shot at some action, who was bloodthirsty and anxious to see at least three fatal accidents. I could tell after a while, that's all. And I could tell that Jerry wasn't quite right. He was overweight and had squinty eyes, like Granby's, squeezed together somehow from the sheer pressure of what could have been lust or greed or a thing even meaner. His hair was short and blond, cropped close like a government agent's, his scalp pink and weak-looking through the stubby hairs. Right from the beginning I didn't like the guy. But I told myself, and rightly so, Get along with him and you'll get along with Grover Littlefield. Sometimes -- all the time -- you have to put up with the bad to get to the good. Even the wild animals know that.

"I seen you somewhere before," Jerry said as soon as I got to the pickup. He had one arm draped over the bed of the truck, his little eyes so hidden there was no telling where he was looking. There'd you pick her up?" he asked Grover, not moving an inch. "I've seen you somewhere."

"I work at the track," I told him, acting cheery and upbeat. "Maybe you saw me there. Seems like everybody and his brother goes to the speedway sometime or another."

"I got better things to do," said Jerry "I got better things to do right now," he said, sighing through his nose, "though I guess I don't have no vote on the matter."

"So let's get ourselves in gear," cried Grover, hustling around the pickup, although he hustled right back, not having anything to do on the other side. "Let's get this show on the road."

"Shit," Jerry said. "For shit's sake." Then he sighed again, as though he had the weight of the world on his shoulders and was weary from it. To be honest, I wanted to kick him right in one of his fat old legs. I'm not a hurtful person, but some people test you more than others.

"We're on our way," Grover said loudly, when Jerry moved around toward the driver's side. He was being positive about things, and I appreciated it.

Before I got into the truck I looked over the bed of it, mostly to see what it was that fishermen took on fishing trips. There was a pea-green tarp, folded into a square. There were four fishing poles lined up side by side and alongside them was a blackened grill next to some charcoal in a little box. Near the cab were two cases of beer that looked like enough alcohol to fill an entire fishing stream. But I've already mentioned what the town was like after five o'clock. Other than that, there were two metal carrying cases that looked like toolboxes but were probably full of fishing doodads, worms or hooks or fake mosquitoes or something. It was only when I saw the two toolboxes that I started worrying maybe I'd be an idiot when it came to fishing. It was six-thirty and still light and would stay light till about nine-thirty -- a lot of time for ignorance to make a spectacle of itself.

"Walleyes, here I come," I said, trying to beat down the way I felt.

"Wonderful," said Jerry and he started the engine. "Just wonderful."

I was between him and Grover Littlefield in the cab of the truck. We all kept our legs together, even Jerry, who was driving the truck, so there were spaces between us on the plastic seat cover, like checkers on a checkerboard. I played a game with myself with rules that said if my left knee touched Jerry's right knee, I'd die then and there. But the other game I played was with Grover Littlefield, was that if my right knee touched his left knee, I'd die, too, but in a much better way. There was a shotgun on hooks across the windows behind our heads, and that made everything seem more fateful somehow.

"So where do we go to get the walleyes?" I asked. "I can taste those babies right now." We'd already turned onto a country road I didn't recognize, and so what I really wanted to know was, Where are we going? I was trying to sound like a big-shot fisherman, somebody who knew walleyes and walleye ways, somebody to be afraid of and admire and be good to all rolled into one. But what I really wanted to know was, Where are we?

"Grover," said Jerry. his fat red face like a tomato aimed down the road, "Grover, I'd appreciate it if you'd get her to sit still and be quiet for the rest of the trip. I'd appreciate that. And hand me one of those beers while you're at it. All this talk's worked up a thirst in me."

Grover slid open one of the windows behind our heads, then leaned out, tearing at the paper around a case of beer. After a while he turned around, holding three beers that clinked in his hands from the movement.

"That's more like it," Jerry said and opened his with the bottle caught between his big thighs. "I can take just about anything with a beer in my hand."

"That down there is what I'd call an extra hand," Grover said, giggling in an embarrassed kind of way. "I'd call you a three-fisted drinker."

"You know it, buddy. You got it. I just hope the little lady don't get too excited from the revelation of it all." He took a quick swig of the beer, driving with one hand as though there were something smart involved in being able to do it. I'll admit right now I couldn't stand him. I couldn't stand the sight or the sound or the smell of him. The only thing that kept me from saying so was Grover Littlefield, who seemed to be in a trance, staring at the trees going by his window.

"Yes, sir, Grover boy," Jerry said, "I just hope our little expert here don't lose her concentration."

I was all turned around and lost by the time we got where we were going. Jerry had made some unpredictable left- and right-hand turns until we ended up on a dirt road with high grass growing up between the tire tracks. The air had turned more humid. The smell of water hung inside the cab like something ripe about to fall down on our heads. Through the windshield I could see a line of trees that went in both directions as far as the eye could make them out. Behind those trees were the flickering lights of a brown, slow-moving river. We'd all had three beers, which put us about forty-five minutes and thirty miles away from where we'd started. I was in a better mood by then, what with the beers and the smell of water and the fact that Jerry had kept his mouth shut for most of the drive. I've seen decent men turn mean with alcohol in them, and I've seen assholes turn nice as pie from the same thing, and I thought maybe Jerry fit into that last group.

We got out of the truck. Although the sun was low, it wasn't that low, still cleared the tops of the nearest line of trees. You could hear the leaves moving together, the water rubbing against the shore, and, every once in a while, the splash-thunk of a fish downstream. And on top of everything was the thick, humid, gamy smell of the river.

"Are there wild animals around here?" I asked, but the two of them were bringing stuff from the truck and setting it down under some pines. They opened the tarp, then laid it on a flat space on the pine needles, about twenty yards from the riverbank. Grover carried the two cases of beer, one on top of the other, his arms stretched and smooth and brown against the paper. I felt a ripple of something, seeing that. He put them on the tarp. After that Jerry took the grill and the box of charcoal down toward the river, toward where there was a burned place in the grass near the bank. Wherever we were, you could tell they'd been there before.

"Nice little place you found," I told Grover.

"It's Jerry that found it. All I do is go where he points me. I'd never have found it on my own.

"Oh," I said, "I think you just don't know yourself. I think you could've found a place just as nice on your own."

"Well," he said, "well, you'd be wrong to think that way. I don't know shit about the woods up here." He smiled when he said it, as though not knowing shit were something he was secretly proud of. "Let me get you your pole and some tackle." He went over to the truck where Jerry was already leaning the poles against the bed, fiddling with each one before he set it down. It made me nervous, that he seemed to know exactly what he was doing when he fiddled with them.

"She's not using none of my jigs," Jerry said. "She can have some bait but none of my jigs."

"That's all right," said Grover. "I got plenty."

I moved up behind them and said, "We didn't have jigs where I come from," just in case I was supposed to know what they were. "We didn't have walleyes either." Saying all that, I thought I had the bases covered. One thing I did know about being ignorant was: Tell the truth as much as you can, but stop short of sounding like an idiot in trouble.

"Well what did you have where you come from?" Jerry asked.

"Oh," I said, "all kinds of things." I tried to think of the names of fishes. "All manner of fish," I said. "Except walleyes."

"Here," Grover said and handed me a pole. "Let's go down to the bank and let you test the action. You like your action light?" The way he said it, I knew it was a test question.

"You bet," I said. "Nothing but light action for me." From the look on his face, I could tell I'd gotten the answer right I felt dizzy for a second, just from being 100 percent on the money for a change. "It's light action or nothing as far as I'm concerned."

"You'll like this pole then." He touched the pole right above where my hand held on to it. "It's a good old pole. My brother gave it to me."

"I know," I said. "That's one thing I know and like about today."

When we got down to the water I noticed how big the river was. From a distance it might have been a large stream, but when you got right next to it the perspective changed, opened up somehow until the light of the sun going down, and the flow of the brown current, and the almost invisible movement of the trees overhead -- until all of that made the river look as large and mysterious and deep as what your future life would always be like. It was only a thought I had, standing there on the bank, trying to account for what I felt and what I saw both. Nature has a way of making you think about things, whether you want to or not.

"What is this river?" I asked Grover. "Just what is this river?"

"I don't know. It's a river. It's just a river." He laughed a little. "I don't know, it's a cake, it's just a cake," he said and I laughed, too, feeling cheery all of a sudden. When I looked out there again, it really was just a river and not all that big, either.

"OK. Cast her on out there and see how you like her."

I hefted the pole in my hand, feeling the awkwardness of the thing. Down toward the end the hook and line had been doubled back and hooked inside one of the metal circles that held the line close to the pole. I unhooked it, which seemed to be the thing to do, then let it hang at the end of the pole. A few inches up the line from the hook was a shiny metal piece.

"It gets their attention," Grover said, fingering the piece. "Even if they're not hungry, these babies stir 'em up. It's a jig. That's a jig, if you want to know. All right. Let her rip." He moved over a little ways.

There's no need to go into detail. I cast twice and both times the line caught in the trees with the hook hanging down like a noose over the river. There's nothing in the world lonelier-looking than a hook hanging in midair, nothing except maybe a woman just turned forty trying to fish, and doing it badly.

"I guess you don't have no trees where you come from neither," Jerry said behind me. It was irritating, that he'd snuck up behind me and couldn't help but mouth off.

"As a matter of fact," I shouted, turning on him, "as a matter of true fact, I always did my fishing in a boat. Out in the water. Out in the water where the fish are. Out in the water where I'm close to what I'm aiming to get. That's what we did where I come from."

"A real fighter," he said and grinned, his eyes squinted up till they disappeared. "A true sport. C'mon, Grover, let's us move upstream some. You take one of the cases. I got your gear here." After Grover went away, Jerry held out a Styrofoam cup. "Here's your bait. Watch out for the worms, they bite. Like to have taken my finger off one time."

He looked so serious I said, "Thanks." Then I said, "But where are you going? What's going on?"

"We need somebody to stay and watch the gear. All right? Seeing as how you're such an expert and everything, I figured you wouldn't mind fishing down here by yourself. I mean, I know how privacy is meaningful when people fish. OK? Fine."

"But," I said, "but . . ." I looked around, but all I saw was the tarp and the grill and the little box of charcoal. It didn't exactly need an armed guard to defend it, I could see that.

"We'll be back as soon as it gets dark," Grover said, coming back with the case of beer. "We'll be back before you know it." Then the two of them headed off upstream, and then there wasn't a thing to see except the leaves of trees, the muddy river, and the hook hanging down in midair like a question nobody had paid attention to.

The sun had sunk low enough to make the river turn bright yellow down the middle by the time I got my line out of the tree. After I reeled it in I stood for a minute, staring at the water over the tip of my pole. It wasn't muddy anymore, just bright and yellow. Occasionally I

heard the splash of a fish, though I never saw one; the glare was too much -- or else I was a fool for something and didn't know it. That glare might have been a million fish, all of them huddling together, their scales flashing the sun, and I wouldn't have known the difference. All of it put me in mind of the beer in the case on the tarp, so I went up under the pines, grabbed the case by a flap, then pulled it all the way down to the bank. I opened a bottle and put the cap back into the box. For a while after that I just drank the beer, then after that I drank another one. Then it seemed to be time to do something else.

I'd leaned the pole against a tree, right beside the cup with the worms in it. The worms were thick and long in there, writhing in and out of a thimbleful of dirt. They didn't look like they had teeth; they didn't look like they had heads; but I was careful. I had to open up another beer to Dutch my courage, which should have told me to stop what I was doing then and there, except I couldn't stand the thought of Jerry's fat face saying he guessed we didn't have fish where I came from either. And worse, the thought of Grover's face, disappointed in me maybe, his good feeling for me gone forever because I couldn't catch a fish, because I was a liar and forty and pitiful. When I pushed the middle of a worm onto the hook it corkscrewed itself around the shaft, grabbing on like a furious hug. Both ends of the worm were as blind and helpless as the tips of fingers.

"That's terrible," I said and looked behind me, as though somebody else had said it. "God Almighty," I said loudly, then turned back to the river.

This time I cast beyond the trees, right into the river where the current immediately began to take the line down-stream. All I did was stand there and watch it and hold the pole, even when the line stretched out to a 90-degree angle. As long as the hook didn't bite into the bank downstream, I figured I was fishing. I stood there like that for a long time, at least for two beers' worth of standing, although after a while I sat down on the case of beer. I didn't know anymore how many beers I'd had -- which is just exactly too many -- but I began to think, sitting there on the case. I began to think about fish, the walleyes and the other things down under the water. I could picture them swimming through the brown haze, the glare of the sun overhead like a sky on fire, swimming through all that because they knew what they were doing. They belonged there and knew what they were doing, and I didn't. I wondered whether Bucky belonged wherever he'd gone, whether he'd come back, the way I'd read that salmon did, except then they died. Thinking about Bucky coming back and dying was almost a peaceful way to look at it.

"Come back and die, you old bastard, you," I said out loud, but not in a hateful way. Sometimes a curse is a way of showing affection or hope about things. "Or else don't," I said, "and stay with Miss Tight-ass and see what happens. I might have other fish to fry, by God." I was a conversational fool right then. It must have been the beer, I think, that and the nature everywhere.

Then I felt a pressure on the line, which scared me to death. Of a sudden the last thing in the world I wanted to do was catch a fish. I jerked the pole, started reeling in the line as fast as I could, reeling it in so quickly I could tell it was all right, that I hadn't hooked anything. When the hook came up the worm was gone. It had been a sorry sight from the beginning, so I was

glad to see it gone. Nothing curled up the way it had been is a pleasant thing to see. I leaned the pole back against the tree and left it there.

Upstream I saw a beer bottle floating down and I knew it was Jerry's, Jerry being a pig and an asshole. Another one came by, too, and that was Jerry throwing Grover's bottle in. I thought about all those fish under there looking up at the bottles, wondering what the devil they were, friends or enemies. It made me sick to my stomach, though that might have been the beer. I was a little dizzy and sick. I went up to where the tarp was spread out on the pine needles, lay down, and stretched out. For a minute everything swarmed around, but it quit that after a time. It might have been a few minutes or a few hours; I don't know how long it was, except when I woke up it was dark and my head hurt and I could hear them coming through the woods.

I lay still to keep my head from hurting. They were laughing about something when they came, Jerry's voice snorting and hawking, Grover's voice strange -- high-pitched, gigglish, like a girl's somehow. It wasn't the same pleasant laugh I'd heard him make back in town, so I knew they were drunk as skunks on the beer. I rose up on my elbows to see better, wincing as I did it. They had fish, at least four of them that I could see hanging from Jerry's hand; all Grover had was a six-pack in one hand the poles in the other. It was dark and they were just dark shadows against the even darker trees.

"Where's the little lady?" Jerry called out. "Where's that little Dale Evans fishing champion? Shit, she didn't even start the charcoal. I told you, I told you she wouldn't have." I stayed put, just watched Jerry's big fat shadow crouch over the grill. "Grover, you start this up. I'll clean the fish. I'll clean my fish, you worthless son of a bitch. You got no talent, I swear, two fucking no-talents and me smack in the middle." Grover giggled, crouching over the grill now.

When the charcoal lit up, I could see Jerry squatting over a fish with a knife in his hand and blood everywhere. He'd taken off his shirt, showing a fat stomach that hung like two huge bloody lips over his belt buckle. He was none too steady, kept clutching the fish to his stomach, grabbing it up, and pulling stuff out of it. The charcoal settled into an orange glow that made the needles over my head look like a blue wave crashing down.

"I'm more of a goddamn Indian than you are," Jerry said and stood up with half a fish in one hand and the knife in the other. I could see his silhouette flexing its arm muscles at the river. The river was invisible, though. "I'm a goddamn savage is what I am." He turned toward where I was and I could see the blood and fish scales all over the front of him. I wished that the light from the grill would go out. I wished the sun would come up and then it would all be over.

"Where's the little lady?" he called, stumbling up toward the tarp. "I see you," he said. "I see you, you fucking liar. Fishing, my ass."

"Keep away from me," I said when he got close. "You keep away from me."

He stood at the edge of the tarp, swaying, squinting down at me with the light from the grill glowing off the back of his head. Then he dropped the knife and the fish and his face grimaced in a terrible way. "You don't know for shit about fishing. You don't know for shit about me. Grover, he's a puppy. He's a damn ass-backward puppy." I could see Grover come weaving up from the grill, still giggling, giggling as though there were a mosquito in his throat.

"You come near me and I'll kill you," I said. "I'll kill you. Grover? Grover?"

"Grover, Grover," Jerry said in a voice he thought was mine, but wasn't. "I know you. I seen you somewhere before. I seen you and you're up to a different kind of fishing. I know you. I know you. Honey," he said, "honey, I'm your friend."

I flipped over and got on my knees, scrambled up the tarp with my head pounding, but Jerry was quicker and grabbed hold of my ankle. I kicked at him, then he pulled me down and I punched his chest, but my fist just grazed off all that blood as if I were wiping him off.

"I'll kill you, you fat asshole, I'll kill you!" I shouted, but I could hear Grover giggling off to the side and I could smell Jerry and then I could feel Jerry and it was no use. It was no use. It seemed like it was Jerry doing it all, then it seemed like it was Grover, and then it seemed like it might have been Bucky or Granby at the racetrack or the obscene phone caller or my father with checkers in his hands. It seemed like I was underwater with beer bottles everywhere. Then I started throwing up and it was over.

For a long time I didn't move. I could hear the two of them talking down by the grill. They sounded exactly like two men on a fishing trip talking about things men talk about on fishing trips. I turned on my side, curled myself up, then lay still. I lay so still I thought I could feel the river moving underneath me. I lay still so long I wondered about myself. Off above the trees I recognized stars, all of them flung out across a million billion miles of nothing, but I recognized them. They looked like candles on a cake, a cake as big and sad as dying one day would be. I wondered if I'd done something to deserve all this. I wondered what it was that had brought me to this. I could see the stars and feel the river moving under me and I wondered, to keep myself still, I wondered, Did I do something wrong?