

Self-Portrait of Someone Else

by

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PART ONE

1

Recently I think I became someone else.

When the alarm clock rings in the morning, it sounds sharper than usual; getting up, my feet don't seem to quite touch the floor; looking into my bathroom mirror, my face seems to be melting, sliding, my eyes drifting farther apart, my nose flaring, teeth shifting....

I don't know what's causing this, and I don't know what to do.

All I know is that after a few days, the alarm bell begins to take on its own sound again, I can feel my toes touching the living room carpet, and my face begins to settle. Life seems normal again.

Except I'm different somehow.

I'm not me.

And now it's happening again. It's just past midnight, and I've started this notebook, writing me down, keeping track. Since these things have begun happening to me, I feel I must keep notes on myself. The insides of the head can hold only so much information - paper keeps the details.

Tonight I have tried to sleep, but as I lie on my bed the sweats come. My sheets become damp. As the night gets deeper, they start clinging to me and I imagine ropes slipping noiselessly from under my mattress and binding me. Feeling the tightening pressure, I have to get up. I don't want to wake up alone, unable to move, not again. I go into my small kitchen; I look around the cupboards and the stove and the fridge, expecting to see something I don't expect to see. Once I opened the fridge and some blur of a mouse or a rat lunged out at me as though going for my throat. I remember almost screaming, closing my eyes instead, backing off until the wall behind stopped me, and then standing there, waiting, my heart racing. When I opened my eyes, the rodent thing was gone, the fridge was open, and I was cold with sweat. I had a pain in my intestines.

I open the door to the fridge cautiously now: nothing leaps. The package of cheese remains immobile, a carton of milk looks up at me expectantly.

I make a cup of instant coffee and a bologna sandwich. I take a few bites and a couple of sips, then leave them on the kitchen table and wander into my living room. It's silent, furnished and dark. The dead TV screen glints, the lamp stands there, the sofa sighs. I'm shivering. I don't dare look down at my feet in case I'm not touching the floor.

I go to my front door to check outside, to know the world is still there.

I live alone in a bungalow, one of seven bungalows, and within each little bungalow lives one solitary person, and no one knows any of the others, no one says hello, no one says goodbye, yet everyone, for some reason, has a telephone (I've seen sitting, talking shapes between parted curtains). These bungalows are set back from the street, in a U shape, almost like covered wagons waiting for an Indian attack. There are two dying elm trees (I live on Elm Avenue) and some withering brown grass for decoration.

It must be after 1 A.M. and it's turned foggy. I can barely see past my tiny porch. I know that thirty yards away, across the withered grass, there's a bungalow. I think I can make out a vague yellow light from a window. Could there be someone else like me alive at this time of the morning?

Suddenly I hear something way, way in the distance. Like someone practicing the tuba, unhappily, a few low, fat sounds coming to me out of the fog. A strange fear chills my spine, and I shut the door, lock it. I check all the other doors in the house. Everything's locked, even the clothes closet. Yet I still don't feel safe. I feel there's something hiding somewhere waiting to lunge at me when I least expect it.

I return to my kitchen and the coffee's cold and there's one fly on my sandwich.

"Hey," I say aloud, and quickly look up at a corner of my ceiling because my echo came back at me, as if there's somebody else there.

I look behind me, thinking I caught some movement from the corner of my eye. Only the quiet and the darkness are there. And so I go from my kitchen through the living room to the study and through my bedroom to my bathroom back to my kitchen in a complete circle, and in each room there's no place I feel safe and comfortable. Everything seems to be whispering; my breathing seems loud.

Tim - I move my lips to avoid the sound of my echo - *go look in the mirror.*

I don't want to do this, but there's nothing for it: I must. Silently I go into the bathroom and close my eyes and switch on the overhead light. I keep my eyes shut. Clumsily, I feel my way to the edge of the basin, knowing the mirror is above it. I wait. I cannot find the courage to open my eyes. I remain standing like this a long time, looking in the mirror with my eyes closed. Then I feel myself slipping, as though spiraling into sleep. I rock, nearly pitch forward, then jerk up with sudden alarm and open my eyes by reflex.

I don't move. Because there's someone in the mirror and it's not me.

2

I dive upward, as though through the thickest water, past the pitch darkness, through a crack of light, into the light, my eyes open, and I hear the insistent ringing of the alarm clock.

Another day: to work: routine; anything but the chaos of the night.

I go to work.

I am the manager of an indoor Olympic-size swimming pool. My official title is Head Aquatic Recreation Supervisor. But in reality I'm just a lifeguard. If swimmers sink, I save.

During the school year, my main function is to let in school students for their athletic hour of splashing about. I keep a lifeguarding eye on them, and after they have finished, I let the damp herd out and, alone once more, wait for the next class.

The first thing I do when I arrive at the pool is walk around everywhere and check out everything. I'm always afraid that I'm going to find something where it's not supposed to be and then have to do something about it. I expect to hear something ticking like a bomb in a clothes locker. I expect to discover a frightened family of cockroaches in one of the desk drawers in the office. I always expect to see, as I walk slowly round the circumference of the pool, the

shape of a motionless body at the bottom, fully clothed, dead, overlooked from the day before.

I check the pool temperature, I check the chemical count of the water, I check my pulse, to make sure everything's in working order. The pool's temperature is just a tad low, the chemical level's a little high, and my pulse is regular. I'm alive. I'm very concerned about my pulse. I check it regularly, counting the pumps, one, two, three, listening to the ~whoosh~ of blood going by my temples. I often sit in my office, overlooking the empty, quiet pool, and listen to my heartbeat. It's like counting the moments, one by one, of my life going away. Thinking: I'll never have the same heartbeat twice. I listen to a single heartbeat, and before it's completely through, before its echo has had time to fade, there's another beat, and another. I'm just that much closer, closer to death.

The first class of my day arrives, a noisy group of thirty-four, supervised by two female teachers. The kids shout, knock on the closed doors, and drown out the sound of heartbeats in my ears. I go to the doors; I open; I'm flooded by life. They tumble in like a wave--girls and boys split left and right into separate locker rooms. The teachers follow, making chatting noises as we walk through the main building to the pool area.

I've made the mistake of telling them a bit about my past, and now at least once a week, the teachers ask why I'm wasting my time at this pool, merely lifeguarding: shouldn't I be doing something else, something more worthwhile? I never argued; I nodded; they weren't used to seeing a twenty-eight-year-old educated man in trunks and sweatshirt just sitting there every day, without ambition.... As the first student comes racing out of the locker room and hits the water with a flying *whoosh*, I climb up to my lifeguard's chair on a tiny tower near the deep end to observe all this wet energy and life, prepared to save if necessary.

They might be right: I might be wasting my life. I went to a university and read psychology and sociology, overdeveloping my mental muscles. I became thoroughly swallowed by the subjects, disappearing between the pages and case histories for weeks on end, and everyone had high hopes for me. I had high hopes for me. I got a degree and went for a master's. Then somewhere along the way I sat back from studies, looked at all the books and papers scattered on

my desk and realized I was wholly obsessed with human problems and flawed social structures. I was consuming large amounts of my youth specializing in studies of how distorted people in society could become. Then a small question created a big issue: Was I a model of civilized normality, an example of what people could be? This question raised an old basic problem: What exactly was sick, and hence what exactly was a cure?

If I had been studying something practical, like plumbing, I could then perform very practical and specific repair work. If there was a leak in a pipe, whether an aluminum or a plastic or tin pipe, I would know how to patch it: specific ways would exist to mend the fault.

But if you discover a leak in a human....

I reread my psychology and sociology books: found nearly every expert had a different answer to what was The Answer. It only depended on which school of psychology fitted one's prejudice.

I read, studied, questioned, realized: brilliant people everywhere were building elaborate systems of explanation and theory to justify their definitions of well behavior.

And so I understood: on his or her own ground, in one's own country, within the realms of over a hundred therapeutic schools, just about any behavior could be considered absolutely stark-raving normal.

So while studying for my Masters, I got sidetracked into doubt. I've never been the same since.

I turned into a brain studying itself. I insisted on regarding myself as a case.

For if I was ever to presume to speak to someone as an authority on why their mental nuts and bolts were becoming loose, it had to be assumed my nuts and bolts were firmly in place and tightened to the right degree.

All I found were a thousand definitions, a thousand ways to be mentally healthy, which naturally had to include the possibility of maladjustment as a form of adjustment. Any fanatic on a street corner shouting "The world is mad; I will not participate; thus I am sane" could be right. The science of psychology dissolved before me....

A lot of things have happened since I first had thoughts like these, the main one being that I did become a sort of plumber: a practical lifeguard. At twenty-

eight years of age, I sit perched on my tower, guarding lives, knowing I can do something practical if someone sinks below the surface and I see it. This is as close as I can come to helping people without having doubts about the method.

No one drowns. I've done my job. I say goodbye to the teachers. The students shout as they dress. I hear their voices exiting. I check the locker rooms to make sure they are empty; I close and lock the front doors to keep out the unwanted. I return to the pool, and everything is quiet. There is not a single ruffle on the glass-smooth surface of the water. It's silent, dead silent. I check my pulse.

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Five identical classes, six and one half hours later and it is time for me to return home.

Home is the place I return to when I have nowhere else to go. I do not want to go there and listen to the silence and stare at the corners of my rooms, waiting for the shadow of an inanimate object to move ever so slightly.

I drive through streets as evening falls. Lights are on inside most stores. People pass in cars, no one walks the pavements. I pass a franchise restaurant famous for selling highly processed food full of artificial additives and colorants to millions of people everywhere.

I turn back and go in. Young people under harsh lights package and serve food. Customers order using trademark names, pay, take their trays, search for a plastic place to sit. I order, pay, take my food tray and sit on a plastic chair. I spread the meal before me: round hamburgers within buns hidden in pliant Styrofoam containers. I've read somewhere that a reputable university performed scientific laboratory tests that consisted of feeding two dozen tiny white mice the same type of round hamburgers I have before me for a period of six weeks. All but two died.

I undo a Styrofoam container. I lift out my round, warm hamburger. I lift up the edge of the bun and peek at its innards - it appears harmless. I bite. It tastes sweet and innocuous. Yet all but two died.

An elderly lady with limp gray hair sits down alone at a table just opposite. She wears ten layers of lumpy sweaters. Her face is blank, she doesn't seem to have any teeth. She slowly unfolds her food before her. Her lips, like monkey lips, curl round a piece of hamburger bun and gently tear off a soft morsel. As she munches, she seems to be mumbling to herself and nodding her head in agreement.

My heartbeats begin again, rushing blood past my eardrums. She begins to speak louder. She looks before her. I'm there. She talks.

I hit my knee on the table as I hurriedly get up. I leave my food and start toward the door. I think she calls me back to her.

I get into my car, start it, put it into reverse, turn up the radio and back away. Hurry, Tim.

There was a time, I think, when I would have remained, accepted her noise as part of the modern environment, just turned my head and continued eating in cold blood.

I used to be quite different. I used to march in crowds along streets holding a placard listening to people chant against nuclear war. I signed petitions for abortion and women called me a true feminist. I enjoyed crowds. It was in a protesting crowd that I met Alisa Peck. She was tall, dark-haired, with a thin nose, full lips, quiet eyes. When she found out I was working at the pool she would come on weekends to flirt. One Sunday morning when there were only twenty-some people in the pool, we were standing at one end and she was saying, "I should push you in."

"Don't," I said, grabbing at her approaching hands. Then there was a blurred moment when something tugged at the corner of my eye. But Alisa, with a little laugh, was coming closer. Then this fluid motion, as though half inside my head, passed like a shadow again. I felt the tug and, while holding Alisa's hands, moved my sight over the pool.

It took me a moment to focus; I was still smiling at something Alisa was saying. The handful of people in the pool were splashing, seemingly safe and absorbed in their games and exercise. No one noticed.

Then I did.

A shadow, there in the distance, over the length of the pool, moving, undulating, an indistinct shadow quiet beneath the water.

I stopped playing and took two steps away; my breathing intensified.

"Oh, God."

I began a slow, uncertain trot along the edge of the pool, my eyes fixed on that appearing, disappearing shadow; I wanted it to be a reflection, a spooky illusion. As I approached the far end, I expected that shadow to dissolve, simply a refraction of light....

Then I saw the long, long hair floating on the water. Suddenly the world snapped into a dream for me. My heart caught, and the air halted in my throat.

I froze at the poolside, staring. This long hair floated to the surface, in peace, long swirls spreading, growing slowly on the surface of the water.

"Tim?" It was Alisa's voice, concerned, at my elbow; she had followed me. "What ... is it?" She too looked. Then I heard her gasp.

It was no dream. Her reaction was reality. I leapt.

The leap seemed to take forever, as I soared through the air, diving toward the hair. An absolute, eerie silence filled the pool. The water surface became a mass of blinding reflections. I reached out, strained, wanting to dive into the middle of the hair, proving it had no substance.

As I hit the water the dream exploded - all was sound and rush, the true speed of reality. I reached the hair in an instant and plunged my hand into the middle of the mass. My hand found the shape of a skull. My fingers scrambled past the top of the head, down the face, over the forehead, eyes, nose, and as my fingers slipped into the mouth ajar, I pulled.

The face rose, turning in my direction, passive, heavy, hopelessly drowned. In that moment, staring into that young girl's face, with the water in thin streams running off it and the thick ropes of her long hair splayed across her features, I wanted to lift and toss her away, like a brief, weightless nightmare, toss it out of

the water, across the pool and through the building, and far into the Sunday-morning sky, disappearing, absorbed, gone, not real.

The girl's head dropped limply forward, falling with a splash face first into the water. I went into automatic, following the rules of safety. I twisted her round, wrapped an arm firmly across her chest, lodged my hip against the small of her back, and tugged her, one-armed, toward the side of the pool.

In a controlled hurry, I lifted the limp girl out. A breast had worked itself halfway out of her bikini. I took a moment to place it back behind the cloth. I was obsessed with neat details, the rules of life.

As I laid the body flat on the cement, I noticed another eerie silence filling the pool. I looked up, wondering whether it was real or just me. Swimmers, once playing and shouting, were slowly turning their curious eyes toward me at the far end of the pool. Some were wading in my direction.

Alisa, biting a knuckle of her hand, came toward me, hesitating, one step, two, stopping.

I said, "Go to the office and phone the emergency number. The number's stuck on the handle of the phone." She stopped, pressing her hand harder against her mouth, and did not move. "Now. Do it." I did not shout. I was firm, in control, following rules, real. She moved; she ran.

I returned my attention back to the body. The head, arms, and legs were in unusual positions, positions that a body with life in it, even a sleeping body, would never assume. There was no one in that body any more. I straightened the limbs into a semblance of normalcy. I did not want the other swimmers to see the girl like this and think something was wrong. They might panic.

I cleared the long hair from her face, propped the head backward, pulled the mouth open and placed an index finger into the orifice to locate the tongue. I pushed it flat down, then, lowering my lips to hers, breathed my life into her.

There was a blockage; a wisp of air disappeared down the passage, most of it blew out the sides of the tight seam of my mouth on hers. I sat back and stared at her. I slapped her face, testing for reaction. I bent her head farther back and thought I detected a small convulsion of her jaws. A red fear jolted my body.

She might still be alive.

I had decided from the first that she was dead. The limpness of the head wobbling on the neck, the puffed look, the splayed limbs - it seemed obvious. I was only going through the motions until the real people got here with their machines and medical certificates and told me she was dead.

I covered her face with mine and breathed. I thought more went in this time. I placed my hand on her sternum - the feel of her cold and naked and wet and soft - and pushed - and breathed - and pushed - repeating, and repeating, endlessly - even when Alisa came back to me and said breathlessly that they were on their way - I continued - when other swimmers came up to murmur suggestions, or stare like Alisa with their hands against their mouths, some whispering, shaking their heads - I continued forcing my breath into her to give that faint spasm I'd detected a chance to become life once more.

The medical team arrived: stretcher, oxygen and portable machines. They took over. I stood, backed off, stared down. Alisa took my arm. I observed as they too made their attempts to bring her back. I watched every movement for the next minutes, their hands moving, probing, pushing, checking until they looked up at me and said, "She's gone."

I was not fired. I was given time off to have a breakdown.

It was not my fault, they told me, wanting me to keep my job and my sanity. The girl had a history of epilepsy; the parents were irresponsible to have sent her into the pool without some kind of surveillance; it was not my fault.

It was one of those things.

It could have happened to anyone.

It wasn't my fault.

It happened to me.

It was my fault.

But I kept my job, but that's all I kept. I got rid of Alisa, I got rid of the committees for peace, abortion, crowds, and people.

I changed. I could feel, quite distinctly, a distant alteration.

I began seeing things that used to be hidden in me appear on the surface.

When I return home, I'm hungry. I walk through my rooms, checking the corners. I wash and change into my nightclothes. I make a sandwich and go with it to my overlarge reading chair. It's a huge chair, meant for sedentary invalids who watch television. I sit and it swallows me up. My feet barely touch the rug. I put my sandwich on one arm of the chair and my book on the other arm. I am alone. I stare around. Nothing moves. Yes, I am alone.

God. So often, so very often, when I am alone like this in my home, reading or thinking or looking around, I do notice that it's all so very, very still that I might very well be dead.

Police Report

The subject, Tim Buckles, Jr., was born in Los Angeles, California. His father was a small businessman; his mother, a housewife. He had one brother. After graduating from high school, he attended college, pursuing studies in human sciences. For four years he was employed by the Department of Recreation in the Aquatics Division for the city of Los Angeles. His most recent employment was with the Nestor Richards Corporation.

Parks and Recreation Director

Yes, of course I remember Tim Buckles. In fact, it was I who originally hired him. Back then, I was regional manager for that part of the city. We needed someone to run the pool - a responsible individual to serve the local school as well as on public holidays. To oversee, lifeguard, generally manage. In the beginning, he was attending a university, knew swimming, had the proper life saving certificates - it's all in his file - and he was willing to switch to evening classes. It was a perfect arrangement. I hired him.

Professionally speaking, I was thoroughly satisfied with his services. He was punctual, diligent, rarely ill, though once I recall finding him in his lifeguard's chair shivering with fever. Real dedication, as far as I'm concerned.

He remained with us for four years, and we were glad to have him. Except for the two losses under his supervision, he had an unblemished record. At the time, we thought the drownings unfortunate and grievous, and at no time did we charge them to Tim Buckles' incompetence. His past record proved otherwise. Of course, knowing what occurred after he left the Parks and Recreation Department, the things he did, we can only speculate....

I hope to God I'm wrong.

Psychologist's Comments

From the facts currently at hand, it appears that Tim Buckles experienced periods of diminished alertness, mental confusion, disorientation, difficulty in fluid speech, cognitive deficits and prolonged delirium. The symptoms varied from day to day.

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When the telephone rings, I jerk awake. The television is on without sound, a book is open in my lap, a light shines from the kitchen, and the telephone is in the study behind me. It rings again.

I get up, look into the study, and watch the telephone ring several times. I answer and wait, listening.

"Hello?"

"Hello," I respond.

"Tim?"

"Yes."

"It's me."

I wait.

"Alisa."

I wait.

"Remember?"

"Hello, Alisa."

"You sound strange. Am I interrupting anything?"

I am looking at the bedroom door. It's open a crack. There's a shadow. I'm waiting for it to move.

"Tim?"

"Yes?"

"How are you?"

"Fine. How are you?"

"You don't sound okay. Is something the matter?"

It moved.

"Just a minute." I put the phone down and move toward the bedroom.

Heartbeats, mine and from the bedroom. The sound grows as I approach. I watch the shadow. As I come closer, it fades, disappears. I place one finger on

the door and push. It moves slightly. Slowly I look in, hearing the heartbeats, expecting hands to grab my throat, thumbs against my windpipe, a face thrust toward mine, death.

Just as this is about to happen, the phone rings. I look back. The telephone, off the hook, lies there.

When it rings again, I feel something lightly touch the back of my neck. I close my eyes and whisper gently, "Please."

The phone stops ringing, the touch goes away. Only the heartbeats remain. I go to the phone.

"Hello?"

"Everything okay?"

I sit down and turn my head to a corner without shadows.

"Yes."

"It's been a long time since we talked."

"Yes." I try to remember. "Very long."

"Too long."

"Yes. Too long."

"Do you miss me?"

"Yes." I hear so many heartbeats.

"We can see each other again, if you want to."

"Again?"

"Yes. I hope you don't mind if I called."

"No, I'm glad."

"Do you want to see me again?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Now."

"Tim, I--"

I hang up. I hear other things. Behind me. I check each room, each closet, each corner. The telephone rings again. She must want to say something else. I answer.

"Hello."

"Hello."

I freeze. The same heartbeats, the breathing. It's me. I'm there.

"Hello, Tim. It's me."

I drop the phone. I back up - I enter the bedroom. "Hello." I spin around, looking for the voice. I'm everywhere.

I sit in my living room and the light from the kitchen snaps off. It snaps on. Off again. On. Off. I close my eyes, I check my pulse, I hear heartbeats and a roomful of breathing, and a bell. I hear knocking. I open my eyes.

Knocking.

I rise and float toward the doorknob. It turns. Infinity. As though far away, an evening wind blows, and it touches my face, and the touch seems far away. I see a shadow move behind a curtain in the bungalow opposite. I hear a passing car. This is what it means to be alive.

"Tim!" Alisa hurries toward what is left of me, coming from the dark, along the narrow walkway, into the light of my doorway. "Tim." She is so very far away. Tim.

"I knocked and knocked and when no one answered--"

With fingertips she touches the bare flesh of my elbow. She can not know what she does. It is the first time someone has touched me since I touched the dead drowned girl.

I stand like a stone, suddenly warm inside.

Tim?

The touch. I feel the touch. A sob wells and breaks from my chest.

"Alisa...."

Alisa takes me, she holds. And something hidden within me until this moment allows me to fall apart. And believe: I am not mad, I am not mad, I am not mad. Because I am in Alisa's arms.

Alisa's Statement

I loved him.

Go on.

Even now that I know, I still think I love him. I wanted to help. He needed....

I understand. Drink this. Better?

Yes. No. What do you want from me?

I want you to tell me about Tim Buckles. It will help us.

Can't this wait?

Yes, but we need to clear up some preliminary matters. Establish things, you see. Drink some more.

What is this?

It's good for what you've got.

But what is it?

The doctor prescribed it. Now, your name is Alisa Peck?

Yes. Why?

It's for the record.

What record?

For our files. How long have you known Tim Buckles?

I don't know.

Be precise, please.

I am.

Please be helpful.

What was your question?

How long have you known Tim Buckles?

Which one?

Please....

I didn't think you'd understand.

How do you mean?

Never mind.

I'm sorry to insist after all you've been through, but--

I guess I first met him about two years ago, at some rally. It was about the possibility of nuclear war. He was quiet. Watchful. We were next to each other

listening to a speech. We got to talking. There was something very soft about him. Is this what you want to know?

You're doing fine.

That was the beginning. After less than four months, it suddenly finished. A young girl drowned where he used to work as a lifeguard. I was with him when it happened. He was very professional, but also frightened - I saw that. But it was a normal reaction to something horrible like that. It made a very, very strong impression on him, I know. Afterward, he didn't want to see me any more. He cut off everyone, I think. Retreated completely. I tried visiting him at the pool but he looked right through me. He'd changed.

In what way?

It's hard to say. He was absent. Just stared at the pool.

And what was he like before?

I already told you. Quiet. Thoughtful. Very intelligent. He ... had family problems.

Could you tell us about them?

Don't you have them already on some record, file, what you said?

We'd like to hear it from you.

I don't know much.

All right. When did you get involved with him for the second time?

I telephoned him. I just wanted to make sure he was doing all right. But he sounded as though he needed me. It happened just like that. I had to go.

When did you become intimate again?

That same night.

And then?

Do you have the right to ask these questions?

We want your cooperation.

I sort of began living with him.

Sort of?

Sort of. Off and on.

Did you ever notice anything odd?

Of course. Yes. So much was odd. But I thought that was just Tim being normal.

You weren't afraid?

I loved him.

Why?

What? How do you mean?

How long did this last?

What?

You two together.

Until it stopped. Yesterday. Today. What day is it? What's happened?

Now, now.

Please ... don't let it be true.... It couldn't have happened....

Here, take some more of this. There ... calmer?.... Good.... I think that will be all for the moment. Thank you very much.

5

Help me.

I don't want to be who I've become.

I lie on my bed in the dark in the dead of night, listening to Alisa breathing beside me, and I hope.

I don't want to be me any more. This is hope.

I close my eyes and can just make out a dim part of me, deep, deep down inside, nearly smothered, who wants Alisa, life, the small allowed portion of love.

Change.

Yet there is this strangely dented person lying here in the dark whom I've become, whose sole desire is to remain alone in his living room, reading books on psychology, sociology, pathology, brain wrestling to understand the tiny, tangled, infinite universe of the individual mind.

Then there is this third somebody, surfacing, taking over, who only wants me to go around the house and lock every door and all the windows, shut myself in the bedroom, crawl underneath the bed, and remain there, forever.

I must fight to alter, struggle to change, evolve. Stay sane. For I don't think I've been going out of my mind, no, but receding, slipping slowly inward to the gray recesses of brain, the shadowy folds of membrane and memory. And it could happen, one day, finally, that I'd disappear completely within a fold, sucked in, absorbed, never to return.

No.

No more. I want, and with want comes evolution.

As I have these thoughts in the dark, I can almost feel the ache of my bones as they restructure, an inner, silent splintering and reformation of atoms. Another me emerging.

Somewhere in the distance water is running. Somewhere near comes a humming. It's a dream. I imagine the sunny scene, seeing through the leaves in

a forest, to a waterfall, someone happy, humming, somewhere there. I move in the bed. This is no forest dream. I open my eyes to see what it is. What it is: where Alisa was, is emptiness.... God - was she ever there? - no ... please. I lie in bed alone, listening to the sounds. I am awake, on alert. I turn soundlessly and look through the doorway into my bathroom. The water, the humming? At that instant, the water stops, the humming stops.

I close my eyes, concentrating, clenching my fists: I will make this real, make it now. Sounds must not stop when I look for them. My teeth begin to grind together, my body becomes rigid, sweat squeezes from pores. With all the power in my mind, I focus on the tiny dot of this instant. I will not allow any part of my brain to drift away, and with it part of me. I must force myself to touch down to earth. This is life.

Distantly, I hear the humming begin again.

Relaxing a little I open my eyes.

She is there. Alisa is there, naked in the bathroom. Morning light from the window falls across her flesh. She has showered. She dries her naked self, and I watch, my heart full. Her long, long limbs. Her short, wet, flat hair. Her back. The ache I feel looking at the long grace of her back. I'd forgotten: the female form - the silky movements, the hips, the breasts, the haunches, the all. The endless physical variety, so much more than the basic solid male. I cannot take my eyes away. As she puts the skimpy cloth of her underthings on, I feel a panic. Her flesh covered. Feeling deprived, I become aroused.

"Alisa!"

Later, I look in the mirror. I smile. The mirror smiles. I blink, it blinks. Nothing sliding, no melting, all looks okay. It's like looking at a miraculous recovery. The face in the mirror appears normal.

"What are you doing?" Alisa asks.

"Seeing if my face works."

She laughs. I jump.

"What's the matter?" I say.

"What you said."

"Oh."

I look at her there sitting on my bed, smiling, looking at me. Her eyes are always amused, intent and tender. I don't know how she can look like that all at once.

"What's the matter?" she asks.

"You amaze me," I say.

"Good." She moves a little on the bed, happy with what I said. It's so strange to see her there, in my house, in my life.

"Don't move," I ask, and go to her. Lightly, I touch her cheek and it seems to glow red with life. I touch her arm, and my touch seems to leave a spot of softly glowing red. Every part of her I touch seems to glow suddenly, as though there is a multitude of muted lights just beneath her flesh.

"What are you doing?"

"I don't know. Making sure you're here?"

Alisa laughs again. Her laughter in my dead bedroom.

I turn and look around. We're alive, room! Take that.

"Timmy." Alisa hugs me from behind.

Together we lie upon my bed.

"Alisa...."

She lies there, hugging me, her eyes closed. For a second, just for a fraction, she looks dead, her mouth a little slack, her hair a mess on the pillow. "Do you feel dead when your eyes are closed?"

Her eyes open. "What a strange question."

"Do you see things when your eyes are closed?"

"See things? I think that's what opening your eyes is for, Tim." She studies me. "Do you see things with your eyes closed?"

"Sometimes."

"Such as?"

"Well, let me look." I close my eyes. I wait.

It sure is dark in here.

"Tim?"

"I'm looking."

"...Well?"

"I ... I think I can just barely see something deep, deep within me."

"What?" She sounds interested.

"A small floating red something, in an overwhelming blackness." I look at it some more. "A feeling." I open my eyes. "It might be a feeling. But I don't know which one."

"That sounds so sad."

Suddenly this feeling seems to overwhelm me.

"Don't go away."

In her arms once more I begin to cry, and she is there.

Everything's going to be fine. Days pass, Alisa is there. I touch the rug when I walk. The shadows don't move. On my tiny front porch I keep potted plants. I often enjoy squatting by them and investigating new leaves and looking for uninvited insects, keeping tabs of each plant's thirst habits, and I even talk to them when no one's looking. Now I take these potted plants from the porch and move them inside for the winter. Alisa says we should both get involved in all sorts of activities. I smile. Alisa talks about other jobs, other futures for me. I nod. Some of her clothes hang in my closet. Her scent is in the air. My home is our home. Yes, everything from now on is going to be okay.

PART TWO

Alisa's Statement

And then?

Our lives ... when together ... became normal.

Normal?

Yes. We became accustomed to each other.

You seem more relaxed today.

I'm going to try to be more helpful.

Good. Perhaps you could start with one of the first odd things you noticed about Tim. A misunderstanding, say, some small details....

The flowers.

The flowers?

I came to his place one day with flowers, a huge bunch of them. I'd bought them on my way over from the supermarket. I asked him whether he liked them. He looked, said they were okay, but I had a feeling something was wrong. I put them in a vase and was unpacking some groceries in the kitchen, when Tim came to the doorway. I can still picture him. He said he liked flowers a lot. Just so long as they weren't in vases. I didn't get it at first. He said he preferred his potted plants. He said....

"... I prefer the plants in my pots. I can pass by, say hello, take a whiff, and leave them. Leave them growing. That's my idea of real flowers."

"Oh."

But the flowers stayed where they were, in the vase: throughout the unpacking of the groceries ... throughout the cooking of dinner ... throughout the silence of eating. Tim kept smelling the smell. His eyes stared at them.

"Alisa."

She put down her fork and paid attention.

"Domestic flowers, cut and put into a container, do not perfume the room. Instead, what you have is the stench of extinction."

Alisa sat opposite Tim a moment, then nodded. She got up, grabbed the flowers in a bunch from the vase, went to the trash bag, and dumped them in.

"There."

Seeing those fresh flowers lying in the trash like that, amid the coffee grounds and crushed cartons, was awful to Tim. "No..." It was like a small cry. He went over and began picking them out of the trash. "Okay, it's okay. I'm sorry."

He seemed to be almost weeping. "It's a preoccupation of mine. I hate ... natural growing things turned into dead decoration. Please, buy flowers anytime you want. I'll get used to it."

She took the flowers from him...

We kissed. Made up. I thought it was a bit of a strange way to look at flowers. But I was trying to understand.

Good. Good.

Is this helping?

Very much. I think this may be the start of getting somewhere.

1

We start off the day by staying in bed for an extra fifteen minutes. Then we have to jump out and hurry around my house, getting ready to be late for work. She washes, I wash. We button buttons, zip zips. Toast, coffee, a cigarette left smoldering in the ashtray, close the door behind.

I follow her car, driving my car. She wants to show me where she works, so that during the day I can picture where she is.

She works in this building with a lot of doctors' names listed in metal on the front. Alisa's a doctor's assistant. She says it's a smooth, fairly untroubling job: except for the occasional emergency of someone vomiting in the waiting room or being rushed in with three broken toes, day-to-day work's as regular and neat as the appointment book can make it.

She leads me down a corridor, to the left and into an office. It's small with a big window. She's got a couple of plants. I go over and see how they're doing.

"This one needs more water, Alisa. Look at the edges of the leaves."

There's a calendar on her wall, a couple of prints by a painter who went crazy in Europe and died. Alisa's got a word processor and a chair made so that the backbone takes the weight of the body correctly. The place is clean.

Alisa says the doctor, Betty Omundson, is as regular and temperate as the job. "There's these two large photographs of her husband and two children on her desk," Alisa tells me. "She puts them there because sometimes, when she's giving an examination to males, and they get undressed and put on these white gowns, they get erections while she's examining them. It sticks up under these gowns. They smile at her. One last week said, 'You're a good-looking lady, Doc.' She tells me. Now I can't look at those patients the way I used to."

"I've got to go."

"We'll stay at my apartment tonight, okay?" she tells me. "Here's my extra key."

I leave. Once outside, I put her extra key into my pocket and breathe. I look around. The edges of a southern California semi-residential area. Big cars parked on big streets. Big shady trees. Big sky. It's been a long time since I looked up.

*

I go to work. Seven hours later, I'm finished and I go to Alisa's second-story apartment, located in some anonymous residential complex. I walk past people's windows, trying to look as though I belong. People become very suspicious very quickly if you don't look as if you're supposed to be where you are. I put her key in her lock. Before turning it, I look around to see if anyone's looking at me, thinking I'm breaking in. Nobody seems to care. I look inside at Alisa's territory. It's neat and tidy. That's all I see at first. It looks like a room waiting to be photographed for a magazine article on clean living conditions in urban areas. I step inside, and the room reacts as though it resents my germs. Magazines seem to be squared off at the edge of the coffee table. The television sits in the corner as if it's been behaving itself. I always get the feeling my television set has been doing something it shouldn't when I'm away. She's got a little kitchen, and everything's gleaming, as though it has never been used. I'm staring at things as though they're symptoms of mental health or aberration: if she were a slob, I'd think one thing, if she's too neat, I think something else - neither of them very nice. It's my almost-Master's degree in sickness that's trained me to spot the depths in the surfaces.

I try to stop looking like that and just look. I'll look for the knives and forks - set the table to surprise her. That sounds normal. I start setting the table, get my mind off me, manual labor. I find myself setting the table just so, to fit in with the surroundings. No fork of mine is going to be placed crookedly.

Then I look around, jerking out of the way.... Nothing.... I thought I saw something move, in a corner, coming for me. It's nothing. I go into her bedroom. A bed. A chest of drawers. A big mirror. Stuff. A poster that says today's the first day of the rest of your life. a best-selling, southern California philosophy. Alisa's becoming normal for me. I'm trying to learn about her. I open a drawer. Panties and bras. I touch one and wait to get an erection like a patient in a white gown. Stop.

I go back to the living room. The table's still set, nobody's moved. Everything's under control. I look at the sofa, wondering if it will let me sit down and make myself comfortable. She's got pillows fluffed up on the sofa. Even the

frills look well-behaved. I sit down, and the apartment and I try to get to know each other.

Alisa, Alisa, Alisa. She told me she loved me one night in bed after we had made love. I did not know what to say. I don't believe in love yet, only cautiousness. I've heard too many people say I love you when they wanted something else. What is it in me that she loves which I can not see? Does she see a surface she loves? Or is there a hidden something in me she thinks she sees and hopes to bring out? Or is it just a comfort for the lips, the words I love you, a sentimental need of the soul. Or ... or ... or....

It's time for Alisa to come home. It's time for me to close my eyes, rub my forehead and breathe. Just breathe. Just live.

"I love you, Alisa," I practice alone.

Alisa has plans.

"Tim?"

"Hm...?"

"You ever consider another job?"

I open my eyes.

"Don't you think you're wasting your talents?"

I look at her, next to me, in bed, staring at the ceiling, moonlight showing me her face is figuring something.

"What talents?"

"Your mind. Your abilities."

"Oh..."

"Do you want to be a lifeguard forever?"

"Forever is something I don't think about."

"I'm serious, Tim. What about the rest of your life?"

"What about it?"

"If you don't care about it, I do. I want to help."

"What do you have in mind, Alisa?"

Her face finally turns to me.

"Marketing consultants, business analysts, people who need your knowledge of certain factors.... Psychological."

"Ah."

"Tim..."

"The business world."

"It's reality, and with all the background you told me you have--"

"You know, Alisa, I've always wanted to escape reality. ~Reality~ was what people said I had to accept in order to live life the way it was."

"Say that again."

"*Reality*.... Sometimes I wonder whether I should have gone into physics, because at times I fully understand the modern concept of curved time and space, moments arrive when I think I can see around corners. Sometimes I want to take air into my own two hands and bend it like steel, bend it till it breaks! I wonder if a top-qualified physicist would recognize my longings and ideas."

Silence.

"I guess that means you don't want to change jobs."

Alisa's Statement

I wanted to help him. He had such potential. I felt he had important things in him. I thought he just needed to be drawn out, introduced to life, what's possible. But not extreme help - clinics, hospitals, doctors, steel bars. He had problems I learned about little by little. His family life, things inside him he didn't want people to see - so very sensitive. I thought he knew things most people didn't know; I still think that. Maybe it had something to do with being crazy, seeing things most people miss. But crazy isn't what happened. It was more, it was deeper, it wasn't as simple as people say, or what you probably think. I wanted....

Yes?

To help him.

Yes.

I loved him.

I understand.

I don't want to tell you this any more. You don't understand. He was probably right. He said people who said they understood usually didn't understand anything. I can't do this to him: try to tell a stranger all about something they can't understand.

I can understand. It's my job.

I loved him and got him a job where he had to understand people in order to do things like maximize potentials and profits - and I loved him and did that to him! Leave me alone, leave him alone, leave us alone.

Perhaps it would be better if we terminated our discussion for today.

He was right. People like you are efficient but dead. He was right. He was right. He's right.

2

Days pass. Alisa says she loves me three more times. Alisa straightens my home, she makes my magazines and books behave on the shelves and coffee table - straight edges, forty-five degree angles, no leaning or slouching, like her home, my home. She adds some frills. Vacuums the sofa. More flowers. Even my television set looks a little intimidated. She puts new food in my cupboard, she throws out old food from my fridge, food I've had so long I feel almost attached to it. All this care makes me smile.

"Mouse droppings," she says, cleaning the bottom of the fridge.

Clean, everything's so clean, every day my house looks less and less as though I live in it. Or who I used to be living in a house that used to be me. New, clean me. I half expect Alisa to come over to me, unzip my chest, and start scrubbing my ribs with a toothbrush.

"Tim?"

"No."

"Why do you say that? I haven't asked anything yet."

"I don't want you to think you have total control."

"I don't know what you're talking about. Come and have dinner."

"Okay. What is it?"

I say this too fast - she's got control.

But I become used to it. I want to become used to what life's like outside my mind. I remember I used to know this stuff. It's been so long, though, I'm rusty. So I agree, and agree, just to see what life is like, to see what happens next outside of me.

I become used to her. Her ways. She takes yesterday's newspaper that I've looked through, brings it to the wastepaper basket, and asks, "You don't need this any more, do you?" And I agree, and she drops it in, and yesterday's news is gone.

I get used to her very quickly. Falling asleep to Alisa's breathing is the easiest thing in the world to do.

In the morning she says, "You had nightmares again."

I say, "I don't remember a thing."

But she must be right. Most mornings my side of the bed is as tangled and gnarled as hers is smooth and unruffled. Sometimes I stare at that bed and wonder who I've been fighting all night. Who's trying to get me. Whoever or whatever it is hasn't got me yet, because I'm still standing. It bothers me, though. Not remembering. Supposedly, if you can't remember your dreams, you're repressing something. Sometimes I sift through the covers and sheets, looking for clues. Alisa catches me.

"What are you doing?"

"Looking for my craziness."

"Oh. Good. Tell me when you find it." And she turns and goes back where she's come from. She accepts what I do as normal. That's comforting.

Although we get used to each other in many ways, I can't get used to her naked. At bath times, as she undresses, with every removal of clothing, every lifting and sliding of soundless fabric, every snap or zip, a tight little *ping!* convulses my heart. I can't get enough of looking at her. Often we take baths together, one at each end. We talk about work, discuss meals, movies, something we've read, or just fall silent with our private contemplations. I can lean forward to touch and caress her floating breast; sometimes Alisa gets a grip on my penis and holds it while thinking or talking.

Sometimes she says, "You're growing."

3

Tim Buckles read books on psychology, sociology, and pathology. He underlined certain passages which seemed to have meaning for him:

"It is criminal to steal a purse, daring to steal a fortune, a mark of greatness to steal a crown. The blame diminishes as the guilt increases."

"After a certain age, the more one becomes oneself, the more obvious one's family traits become."

"Stress management is teaching patients how to relax."

"They say serial killers are extremely difficult to catch because they are often highly intelligent, kill without apparent motive, and leave few clues. ... Almost all of the murderers who have been caught are products of broken homes and most suffered either physical or psychological abuse."

"There is no cure for birth and death save to enjoy the interval."

"Who follows another follows nothing. He finds nothing, and indeed is seeking nothing."

"I speak from science and the voice is Fate."

"What is being scrutinized is changed by the very scrutiny."

"A man never reveals his character more vividly than when portraying the character of another."

4

Days pass, and the Christmas holidays begin. There is little work to be done at the pool. Schools are on vacation, so no busloads of students arrive. And it being December and nippy, few citizens come to exercise.

Occasionally it can seem silly to me to be sitting in a thing like a high chair over an indoor pool, just looking. Most everything is taken care of automatically. The heating, the cleaning, the filtering and everything else are run by the ticking, measuring machines of modern technology humming underground. I have a key to the door that hides them. And every day I must visit this huge gleaming fortress of interconnecting steel and silent moving parts, checking meters, noting facts, adjusting valves. I stand still and listen to the ~whoosh~ and huge hum of the machinery. The whole atmosphere has that strong serenity of church: the high vaulted ceilings enclosing the mightiness, the sense of something more powerful than an individual life ... even the hum takes on the tone of an organ playing one continuous chord in the distance. God and technology were made for awe.

With the same key, I lock the door, leaving the hum behind. Then, no one around, closed for lunch, I take a swim in the silence. Plunging, the dull, swift

sound of water by my ears, my arms going round, pulling me forward, pushing water behind. I stop dead in the deep end, I take a breath and sink slowly to the bottom, curled tight, eyes against knees. My ears feel the growing pressure of the depths. Then I hear it. Even here, the dull distant hum of the machine.

Like God, omnipresent, if you pay attention.

Wet I walk to the men's locker room. I shower. Naked I walk through the other rooms, looking, listening, this gigantic complex my realm. I feel important in the hugeness. Proudly I go naked through my kingdom.

In the women's changing room I see wet bikini briefs forgotten in a puddle on the floor. My first impulse is to hide myself, my hands over my penis. I stare at the bikini briefs and feel ... an odd arousal. I want to go over - and touch. Touch with fingers, feet. I'm not sure why. I retreat and return to the men's locker room, seeking normalcy.

I sit, worried, alone, trying to figure out my mind, me. Just when I am feeling nearly normal, things like this happen and I have no idea why.

When the pool reopens after lunch, I am supposed to turn on prerecorded innocuous music. Some time ago, a directive was issued requiring that this sound to be switched on at all times. I defy regulations, never pushing the Play button until at least fifteen worthy senior citizens are in the water, dog paddling around. The soothing music gets on my nerves and into my thoughts. I hurts my concentration while I watch wet people.

Young females come in and I study them. Boys come in and I tell them not to run, not to push, generally to watch out and beware. Like a baby sitter. My eyes return to the girls. And there, on top of my perch, overlooking the pool, the arousal.

No control.

When everyone's gone, and everything's quiet, I return, fully clothed, to the women's changing room. Good: someone's taken the bikini briefs.

About this time during the holidays, ignorant unwet bureaucrats beyond my control believe that it is absolutely necessary to hire an extra lifeguard, some

local college student, who is supposedly going to help deal with the overwhelming holiday crowds who, with their sudden holiday leisure, will supposedly rediscover the pool and attack en masse.

The heaviest day is twenty-five splashers; usually it's half that.

This temporary lifeguard, Bob Something, and I rotate positions: while one is perched on the chair overlooking the pool, watching for the foolhardy who may venture into the too deep end to splash and sink, the other guard retires to the office, or patrols the pool's perimeter, or whatever. I think, read and write. I always keep half an ear cocked for the scream of a whistle, which will indicate that the other guard's going in for a save. It never occurs.

Toward closing time, when no one is likely to pay for thirty minutes' swim, we take turns leaving early.

Bob Collins, his former colleague at the pool

No, I never noticed anything strange, I mean ~really~ strange, about him.

A bit moody sometimes, but mostly friendly enough. On his breaks he'd go into the office and write. He had a bunch of notebooks. I thought maybe he was writing a thesis or novel or something. I asked him once what he was writing and he said, "My soul." Yeah, once in a while he came out with these weird things.

The drownings? I don't know. I wasn't around, can't help you there. And these other things ... you sure it's the same guy?

Friendship? No, outside the pool we never met.

I don't know what else I can tell you. He was only a few weeks of my life.

5

Days pass.

Alisa asks, "Have you been thinking about what I mentioned?"

"What?"

"The job stuff. Doing something more exciting."

"Oh, Reality again. I don't know. What's the point?"

"Tim, you've got to do more than read, go to work, and make love to me."

Why?

Alisa, above me. Her flesh in the lamplight. Moans, movement, rising, lowering. Above, sideways, below me, we continue. The hands, eyes and mouths everywhere. Quickening, we both bear down. The long spasms begin. The room fills. The rush. The contractions fade, like distant echoes, and we lie, entangled, exhausted, the walls of the bedroom drifting away, the insides of my head going white.

I go to a shopping center with Alisa to buy her parents a Christmas present. Signs everywhere say BUY HERE FOR XMAS. Sales people hang around entrances to shops, smiling with friendly professionalism. I move, uncomfortable, exposed, in the high corridors of the shopping arcade, seeing, feeling dead. People are buying for other people. Families. Season's greetings. Togetherness. I feel alone.

Alisa stops in front of a shop full of leather bags.

"I think I'll get my Mom a handbag or something."

I follow her inside and go stand near the wall. She comes toward me, holding up a shiny leather handbag.

"Think my Mom'll like this one?"

"I don't know her."

"What are you getting your parents?"

I think about my parents.

"Nothing."

Alisa's Statement

Where's my baby?

Psychologist's Report

On first view, his upbringing may be considered normal, although there appears to have been a certain unhappiness between his parents. This may have contributed to his later deviant behavior. Conclusions are not final.

6

I know their latest address from the telephone book. I copy it down every year, just in case. This year they're only a half-hour drive along some freeway.

The weather is crisp and clear. I am nearly normal. Maybe I can take it. After all this time.

I pull off the freeway, check the street map, read street signs. I find the apartment complex. I open the gate which has a sign saying, NO SOLICITORS". I stare around, not wanting to be surprised. It's huge, a maze of modern architecture - paths shooting off between bushes and trees, corners that turn into dead ends, plastic plants next to the real. It's a rigid, complicated style, imitating confusion. It's designed to combat the functional style of the block apartments environmental groups call dehumanized.

Lost, I take a long time to find the mailboxes. I read all the names very slowly, my heart pounding in anticipation of reading their name, my own. I dread locating them.

BUCKLES: numbers 48 and 49

My mother's name is on 48, my father's on 49. Separate residences. I hope it's helped them.

I look around. Three paths lead away, disappearing into a different maze of apartments, two stories high. There's no one around to ask directions. I go down the center path. There are ferns, big bushes, small trees, occasional empty lounge chairs, a pool, a barbecue pit, signs stating rules of leisure area usage, but no 48 or 49.

It's eerie. No one. The silence. No.... I hear the muted sounds of TVs behind doors.

I return to where I started.

I go back to my car.

I drive away.

Half an hour later, I park the car in the same space, go through the same gate, walk, and knock on the first door I find. No one answers. I wander until I see a TV image through parted curtains in a picture window. I knock. A middle-

aged woman with her hair in curlers answers. Two unseen children cry inside. I ask directions. It's simple. They live right above her. "They're a quiet couple."

Quickly, I go up the stairs and stand before the doors which are side-by-side. The curtains are drawn behind both picture windows. Number 48, number 49. Who first?

49.

When my father answers the door, neither of us says a word. Tim Buckles Sr., inspects me, Tim Buckles Jr., with eyes that express neither joy nor surprise, only a sort of suspicious curiosity. "You huh," he finally says. "Well, well." For a moment, there's almost a smirk. "Come on in, right?" Without insisting, my father turns and walks back into the darkened depths of his apartment, leaving the front door ajar.

It is the last moment I have to turn and run, but I stand rooted, peering inside, craving.

At last, overcome with some insane genetic need the years have not cured, I pass over the threshold, closing the door behind.

It is dim in my father's apartment, and I stand still, waiting for my eyes to adjust. Slowly I see. The apartment is furnished with the kind of imitation furniture common to apartments where single people sit and stay and wait. Paneling that resembles wood but feels like plastic - this covers a table and a wall; a thick, multicolored, synthetic shag rug wall-to-wall; a long, swaybacked couch, two leathery chairs, a TV set switched on to a game show. The heat's also on, and it's so stuffy, so closed in, that I part my lips to breathe easier. My father stands in a tiny kitchen where he can look out over a counter to the living room. He fixes food.

"Just fixing a bite to eat. Want some?" My father wears black business pants, shiny with wear at the knees and on the buttocks. He has on thick white tennis socks in place of slippers. An grayish T-shirt, very worn, the collar hanging loosely around his neck. Unshaven stubble. This is my father. My size, dirt-white hair, loosening flesh for a face, slightly hunched, sloping shoulders. Dad.

He holds up a can for me to see.

"I love the modern world, just like this can." He tries to open it. "Reads: 'Easy-to-open, Press here,' and then you press there and nothing happens. Is this what they mean by the revolution in technology?" He slides open a drawer, rattles around in it, pulls out a can opener. "Well, what's up? Lose your job? Need money? Why're you here?"

Home sweet home. This is the father I remember. He is mine. He started my existence.

"I have a job."

"Doing what?"

"Life guarding at a pool."

"Is that all? At your age? Is that all you're going to do with your life?"

"It's--"

"Not that it matters."

"I don't know. It's enough for now." He ceases paying attention, dumping whatever's in the can into a saucepan. I turn into him. "It's what I'm doing to kill time until I'm dead."

My father looks up from stirring the contents over a flame. He's not sure how to take me, what to do with me. It's like old times. Finally he only grunts and goes back to stirring.

I sit on the couch in the living room wiping my wet palms off on my pants. The TV's been on all this time but with the sound turned down. For a few minutes I follow the movements and business of a game show. Dad continues his steady stirring.

I sit back, my head against the top of the couch, staring at the ceiling.

"Father?"

"Son," he replies, as though he doesn't want to commit himself.

"Where's mother?"

No reply. I look over. His face is staring down at his cooking food, but he must feel my eyes, because he indicates with a nod of his head the wall opposite him, where apartment 48 lies.

"You don't live together any more?"

"Haven't for years, sonny boy. It's one of those things that evolve naturally out of a close personal man-woman relationship. Avoidance." My father lifts the

saucepan from the flames. "I think my little nutritional masterpiece has reached its completion." He peers into the pan and sniffs. "Ah, mushroom soup ~a la can~, nothing beats it. And you never informed your little papa whether you required sustenance from the hearth."

"No, thanks. I'll survive."

"Don't we all? In our little mushroom soupy ways." He brings his bowl of soup to the couch and sits nearly next to me. He sets the bowl carefully upon the low table before us; some soup slops out. His hands tremble slightly. Disease, nerves, my presence? He leans over and takes a soft sip of the hot liquid. He grunts satisfaction.

He fixes his eyes on the television tube, and no matter what image presents itself, he concentrates, staring.

Then he says something I remember he used to say. "Did I ever tell you about the good old days?"

He's always told me about the good old days. Listening to my father, I'd grown up wishing I could grow backward. Everything in my father's world was better yesterday. When he was young, he'd gone to war. He had friends; he had a purpose. Life was intense because it might end with a bullet at any moment. Then America won the war, and life hadn't been the same since. Not for Dad. Being so close to death day-after-day, shooting orientals for three years - then peacetime with its wall-to-wall carpets and no threat of death, at least bullet death, was an intense disenchantment to my father. I think he wanted to keep on trying to die while killing people. That was his idea of the good old days.

"Life," my father concludes, "is a bowl of shit. You wade through, holding your nose, trying to crawl out of the bowl, yet always slipping back in. But oh, I suppose it has its bits and pieces of mushrooms, hey?" He takes a sip.

Then silence. I look over. He's closed his eyes. He's dreaming, thinking about the good old days, of bombs, blood and buddies, basic survival, rations. The simple life.

To bring him back, to get him, I say, "It must have been great to be alive before I was born."

His eyes come back hard from his reverie.

"Your birth was a mistake, buddy. And don't joke about my past. You know nothing. Just like your mother - never understood, never will."

"Dad--"

"Don't ever joke about my past. What's so great about yours? What is your past anyway?"

"You."

"I suppose that's supposed to mean something. Everything's supposed to mean something nowadays."

"I came here to know about that."

"What?"

"My past."

"Ah, the mystery begins to clear, the fog separates, the clouds lift. I was wondering, little son, why, after all these bliss-filled years, this intimate, cozy visit. Now, that was damn good soup. Even burned my tongue."

"I wanted you to know that I became the way you wanted me. De--"

"Life's little victories. Satisfaction in old age, something to look back upon, count the minuses and pluses, tote up the old score sheet, see what it all adds up to, if it's all been worth it. Thanks for warming the cockles of an old man's heart. What are, by the way, cockles?"

"Deformed. Half crazy."

"Cockles?"

"Me."

"What do you have to do with cockles? Really, these leaps of logic of yours are most disturbing. They're deformed, half crazy. If you know what I mean. And I suppose you do."

I have begun to drift away from me, half here, half somewhere else. So much of me is half something. Half normal, half my father, half nothing.

"I've learned," my father says, "that if you want to win a popularity contest, don't have a family. Look at me." He gestures round to the curtained windows, the darkened gloom, the empty furniture, the flickering TV screen. "Top of the polls. So listen. Let someone else be your bad memories, okay?"

Father abruptly gets up and carries his bowl and spoon to the kitchenette. I think he's muttering to himself. Maybe he wants me to think he's half crazy.

Alone, isolated, living with his furniture. He rinses the bowl in the sink.

"Remember when you went loony and we had to tell folks we were sending you to a boarding school? On my salary, it took me three years to finish those payments. Who could call me an uncaring father? Didn't you have it easy - checked-out of your mind and into a clinic? Pretty smart - I thought you were pretty clever there. Leave the shit of reality to be taken care of by us assholes. See, that's always been a pet theory of mine - that the quiet stages of idiotism are preferable to the normal ticking of the well-adjusted psyche. Ask your brother."

Silence.

Me, a successful experiment. A pet theory come true. I tremble. I feel as though I'm ungluing, my fingers disconnecting and drifting out into the living room. The sounds in my ears hurt. I try to concentrate. The game show on TV has turned into a soap opera. People look miserable between commercials. What more do I need from this father? Nothing to say, nothing to share. It is all so lost and hopeless. My father hates life, and I'm alive. He made me. All twenty-eight years of me.

There is a clock above the TV set. The time shown is incorrect. I watch. The hands do not move.

My father returns with a mug of some hot steaming liquid.

"Your clock is wrong."

"Not wrong. Just unplugged. I'm not interested in time anymore. Haven't been for years. I'm in my timeless, twilight years. I'm retired. God, not that soap opera! It's your mother's." He snatches up a remote control unit and begins switching channels, grunting when he apparently finds the right program. Evidently, my father has his routines. Together we watch a commercial about a new, revolutionary electronic utensil which performs five separate time consuming kitchen chores in seconds.

"Maybe I should get one of those," my father says. "I need more free time with nothing to do."

"I better go."

"Not going to visit your mother?"

"Is she in?"

"She's always in. Let me telephone her for you, perhaps she'll be overjoyed."

"You telephone?"

"That's our method of communication. I haven't seen her smiling old face for" - he thinks back - "for over six weeks. It's a workable solution, as they say in the big world." He dials.

I only want to gather myself together and go.

"Do something," my father says with the phone to his ear, listening and waiting. "Don't be so immobile. Move. Immobile people make me nervous. Like your mother. You've got too much of your mother in you." His eyes flick away and stare into space. "Ah, hello-hello. You took your time answering. What were you, in the sack with some other guy, cheating on me?" My father laughs at what he considers a joke. "Guess what? ... No, not that. Someone is visiting me. Someone old and familiar and fond.... No, no, not her; she's dead.... Guess again ... no, guess again ... I'm waiting.... You giving up? You're no fun today. Well, take a look somewhere on the floor and what do you see? Do you see a son? You can tell: he's the piece of furniture that drools. Well, his twin is right here right now, rubbing his face at me.... Yes, really.... Yes, I think so.... Okay. Same to you." He hangs up. "She says to come over."

I stand, dizzy, floating, dislocated. What to do next: say goodbye. Shake hands, kiss, just leave? We haven't touched yet. There is only one way to leave my father - escape. I open the front door and look back. My father stands there in his dim living room with his hands in his pants pockets, his legs apart, watching me dispassionately. His small, clear, blue, mean eyes. His high forehead, bulbous nose, thin, unhappy mouth, square chin. This person says:

"You should never have taken me so seriously."

"You're my father."

"Neither of us had any choice, kid. I was never in the market for a child, my son."

"I know."

"So don't come to my doorstep looking for reasons and something to blame. Blame life. But considering my limited parental instincts, I did the best I could, which perhaps was the worse thing for you."

I nod.

I shut the door behind me. Nobody really changes; they only become more so.

"Mother."

Entering her apartment is like entering a land of dust - everything's heavy, gloomy, worn out, and without life. Bending, I offer my cheek; mother gives me a soft kiss. She smells like dust. Having let me in, she turns and shuffles back to her chair, a used, frayed piece of furniture, so accustomed to her body that there's a permanent imprint of her sitting form: the indent of her rear, the shape of her shoulders. She's turned completely white-haired since last I saw her; her once delicate features seem to have shriveled and simplified into an elderly mask of immobility, as though layers of dust have covered and re-covered her, burying any last flicker of personality or expression. Her whole body seems to have shrunken, fallen inward.

My mother.

Her chair is angled toward the television set, which shows the soap opera my father abhorred. She picks up her knitting which she'd probably interrupted to let me in. "Say hello to your brother, Timothy."

Automatically, I look around the floor. I spot my brother in a dimly lit corner.

He's rocking back and forth, in habitual motion; he clasps a woman's simple handbag and clicks it and unclicks it open and closed; he's always been fascinated by such common gadgets. My brother has been stuck in the land of infantile autism since birth. I go over and squat before him.

"Hello, Babble." His name is Christopher, but my father always called him Babble because of the constant low level of noise he makes in place of speech. He looks up from his concentrated clicking; he looks at me as though I'm a window with nothing outside. He returns to the handbag. I return to my mother. "Hasn't changed."

My mother nods and knits.

I sit on the couch, which, in fabric and design, matches exactly the couch in my father's apartment. I take another awful look at Babble. For years, as I grew up, I considered my brother as a symbol, a malfunctioning someone who I could have been with just the slightest twist of a gene. For years I sweated my brains

to discover the meaning in my brother's unfortunate, irreversible mental deformity; I tried to think of everything to answer the question of why this happened. Finally, I knew I'd sought symbols and meanings where there weren't any. My brother had disappeared into wherever he had gone, and he wasn't telling anyone why. Perhaps he had taken one look at my father and let himself slip into a gray fold of brain, giving up, the way I fear to.

I tremble with the knowledge of my fragile normality. Tremble, seeing Babble once more, hearing the wet mouth sounds, the incessant clicking of the handbag....

I blink and turn back to what is left of my mother.

So this is what she's come to: drawn curtains, monotonous TV, dust, poor Babble, and solitude. What a destination for a life - and why? All the whys concerning my father and my mother. All the answers I made up. Why had she remained bound to my father, that callous man? The inertia of human conduct.... She'd never leave him. Once I begged her to. She said something about how unhappiness in a family, no matter how damaging, was preferable to the loneliness of a single square room. Yet here she had ended, in any case.

"Why are you living like this, Mother?"

She looks up at me as though not comprehending a single syllable.

I start to tell her: "I remember that time when...." I tell her what I remember: when I asked her to leave, her not leaving, her reply.

"Did I use to say that?" She thinks back. "Maybe I did once, I don't remember now. One says so many things, going through life.... We used to talk a lot, didn't we, when your father wasn't around." She stops knitting, as memories seem to return. "I used to take you to the movies. You'd hold my hand very tight when it was a scary movie - you'd laugh so loud when it was funny. I remember heads would turn, people would look to see who was laughing like that. I was proud. Now I go with Babble." She takes up her knitting once more. "But not so often."

We sit in silence. I move my body on the couch, unable to become comfortable. My mother, accustomed to hours of silence, accustomed to not moving, knits, steadily clicking the needles together. From the corner comes the clicking of the handbag.

"You don't visit often," she says.

"No."

"I suppose you have your reasons, just like your father; he's always had his, and you are his son - there's no denying that, I suppose." There's another silence. "I had to have four abortions." I've heard this before. "Your father made me get them." I know this too. It's something she used to tell me many times when my father wasn't around. She tells me now. The story hasn't varied in years. Three abortions, then Babble and me, and then another abortion, and sterility. She blames Babble's defectiveness on the abortions. "You two just made it," she says. "I tricked him." And thus I exist. "I always wanted a big family, like everyone else. And now" - she sighs, finished - "all I have is Babble, now you've left me."

I move on the couch.

"I think I'll make some hot chocolate," she says. "You want some, don't you? You always liked that."

She puts aside her knitting and with an effort shifts positions, moves forward to the edge of her seat, then slowly, weakly, rocking forward once, twice, pushes herself up and stands. She takes a moment to get her balance, then shuffles off like a grandmother to the kitchenette. I stare at the indentation of her body that remains in her chair.

From the moment she begins preparing the chocolate to the moment it is served brimming in a mug before me, there is not a word spoken between us.

Sitting rigid, I feel my mind turn, a slow spin. For a mad moment I want to cry.

Fall on my knees, babbling about my life, the damage, her life, the emptiness. And telling her how there is one thing she never understood - me.

I must have said something, because she answers:

"There's many things I do not understand. You're just one of them." She's sipping quietly, both wrinkled hands gripping her mug. "Sometimes you still remind me of your father." There's a pause; then: "I did the best I could."

I've had my eyes closed, leaning my head back on the couch, listening. I open them. She stares at the television. Did she really speak? Am I going away from where I am? I check my face for tears. One.

I've known forever that she doesn't know what to think of me; because of this, she's probably, with time, ceased thinking of me at all. Except as the little boy beside her in the movies. Now I'm a guest, almost a stranger, being politely accepted, nourished, tolerated. I'm the reality her dream became, and this doesn't fit the images of her life that remain in her head.... This woman's womb. Me and it. One of the many things in this life I will never understand.

The rest of my visit is taken up with watching the soap operas with her; by the time they've finished, she's fallen asleep in her chair. Babble has stopped playing with the handbag and has taken to staring at me, rocking to and fro without expression.

I had come looking for rays of light; there's not a glimmer. I must leave. But the thick, lethargic atmosphere of my mother's room has begun to seep into my bones; I have difficulty moving and rising from the couch; the room seems full of a dense, heavy dust, discouraging movement. Shifting my position, moving forward to the edge of the couch, I have to rock back and forth once, twice.... My mother seems to wake momentarily, and she demands a kiss on the lips goodbye. "Be a good boy," she says. "Visit soon." She drifts back into her dream. Babble stares in blank farewell, his parted lips wet with saliva. I leave.

Outside, I face their closed doors, my eyes racing back and forth, from one to the other. I have the impulse to scream, shatter the air, but I stand still, trembling, alive, without hope, in despair, their child.

Alisa finds me in my room. "Tim, what's the matter?"

Alisa says, "Tim, talk. What's up? I have news - good news, I hope."

Alisa rubs my neck. "Okay. Okay. I'll try to understand. Relax. Something's happened. I'm here."

Someone says, "I love you."

Alisa says, "You scare me when you're like this. Tim.... Tim!"

Alisa holds me in her arms and rocks me. "Tim, Tim. Come back. I need you. You're going to be a father. I'm pregnant."

No

No

No

THREE

From the files of the Bedford Clinic

Timothy Buckles, Jr., at eleven years of age, was admitted to the children's ward of the Bedford Clinic on the authority of his parents.

Upon admission, the patient displayed extreme symptoms of withdrawal, detachment, and passivity. Autistic condition explored: negative. Genetic defects explored (in view of a mentally retarded twin brother): negative.

Solitary therapeutic play sessions begun, with therapist in attendance. Later, selected patients of his own age group were introduced.

Progress in social behavior and interaction slow. Patient often appeared unaware of the existence of others.

After seven months, sudden breakthrough. Evolves within days into talkative child, giving all signs of a healthy, socially integrated individual.

Within ten months of the patient's institutionalization, it was believed feasible that the patient be returned to his parents' custody.

Case successfully terminated.

Above statement signed by Dr. Leonard Bealing, director, since deceased.

The Bedford Clinic filed for bankruptcy four years later. Subsequently building and majority of records destroyed by fire. Arson suspected for insurance claims. File on Timothy Buckles, Jr., inconclusive.

1

The heartbeats have started again.

It's getting harder. Alisa lies next to me, and her lips move. The sounds she makes start to reach me. But somewhere between her and me the sense gets garbled; only noise and static get through. She recedes into the distance.

The mind is having difficulty focusing on what is real and what is only happening inside my head.

In the night, in bed, behind my eyes, I see my swimming pool. Something far away in the water moves. A swirling motion begins, slowly, then gathers power ... hair, long and brown, swirls to the surface. The spinning hair lengthens, quickening, becoming a whirlpool, and there, at the center, something begins to emerge, the top of a white, shiny something. It spins, splashing and whirling, bobbing to the surface like a container of air - a clean, stark skull. It turns around, toward me, staring. I leap forward into the hair, toward the skull. I grab hold of the head as I hit.

I open my eyes. Night. A shadow across the wall; it undulates like something under water. I squeeze my eyelids together; tight, tighter, to be somewhere else when I open them again.... Cautiously, through my eyelashes, I look. I can make out a vertical opening in the curtains over the window - a reflection coming through rain outside. It makes the undulating shadow on my wall. I lie back. The dream is over. Safe.

I feel something in my right hand. I lift it slowly, bringing it toward my eyes in the dark. There, dangling, a few long strands of brown hair like the hair of the girl who died in my pool, the head that I grabbed with my hand.

The heartbeats.

The undulating shadows on the wall like water, sparkling, shimmering, and in the middle, the hair, the floating, swirling hair....

It's getting harder. Awake, I have to concentrate on the now, to make certain I'm still not back there, dreaming.

Breathing deeply, calming the heartbeats, I'm sitting somewhere. I touch a table. I focus on its edge next to my fingers; I look at its surface: a dish, fork, knife. The smell of frying eggs ... I hear a voice. Background music, a radio, a single sentence: "You deserve all the pain I could ever inflict on you." My father's voice in the radio.

Concentrate. What's here, what's now?

A table, a meal. Morning light - breakfast. Alisa sits opposite me, sipping coffee.

"What's happening?"

"Hello, Alisa."

And always, the heartbeats, there, in the distance.

"So you're talking again. Welcome back."

"Why, where have I been?"

"Here but not here. Sitting saying nothing." Her hair's brushed and pinned, ready for work, her face is highlighted with multicolor makeup; some toast crumbs are at the edge of her lips. She stares at me intently, concerned; but beyond that, I see some fear. "Since the day before yesterday you've been acting as though you're on another planet." She puts down her toast. "What's happening? What's going on inside your head?"

"Thinking." It's true. Often thinking is what is the matter. I have a thought, then another, imagine a third, and continue following it, and soon I'm gone, no longer there.

"Tim ... Tim? Are you listening to me?"

"What?"

"I was telling you something."

"When?"

"Just now."

I can only stare. I see more of the fear she cannot hide. Focus, Tim, concentrate. Kill the heartbeats in the ears.

"Your nightmares were really something last night, Tim. I'm going to sleep at my place tonight because I'm beat. You twitch and talk--"

"What do I say?"

"Nothing that makes any sense. Just babbling." Alisa's got a ring on her finger and she's moving it round and round and round. "This is the worst it's ever been. What's happening to you?"

"I don't know." Yes, I do.

"Last night you sat up in bed, staring straight ahead ... I talked to you to try to bring you out of it. Remember?"

"No."

"Tim, are you just a little crazy? Around the edges?"

"Yes."

She smiles. "That's better. A joke."

"No," I try again. "Really."

"Really what?"

"I'm crazy."

She stops smiling. "Are you serious?"

"Yes, I think so." I must warn her off me. "Don't I seem so to you?"

"I don't know." She sits back, biting her lower lip. She shakes her head as though not wanting to see some thought that's trying to get to her. "It scares me. Sometimes. Like now."

The heartbeats are growing; I must fight for concentration.

"I love you."

I look up, startled. Her face, her concerned eyes, are so full of I love you. She wants that to fix everything. Her hand comes across the table to get mine.

Help her: "Maybe," I lie, "I'm just having an anxiety crisis."

"Okay, then." She smiles a little and leans toward me. "That I can understand. You have a crisis, and I'll have a baby."

"A baby?"

"A baby."

I look around. I hear a splash. ("Mr. Lifeguard?") I should be at the pool. Someone may be drowning.

The heartbeats.

I close my eyes, slowly, firmly. Keep them that way.

"Tim?"

"Mr. Lifeguard?"

"... all the pain I could ever inflict ..."

The voices: seal the eyes shut: kill the sounds.

"Excuse me, mister?"

Kill the past. Kill me. I know madness; I've been there before.

"How late are you open?"

Opening my eyes, I am in my chair overlooking the pool. People splash. A young boy below me. Looks up toward me.

"What?"

The boy opens his mouth, and another voice comes from somewhere else:
"How are you still possibly alive?"

I turn to look behind me. There sits my father poolside in an old tattered bathrobe, pressing a remote-control device at a TV. He smiles at me - yellow teeth. His words: "Out of a compassion you could never understand I tried to prepare you for the misery of real life. That's why you deserved all the pain I could ever inflict on you. So you would know...."

"Mr. Lifeguard, how late are you open?"

Yellow teeth and mean eyes: "You know you should never have existed - or at least exist as little as possible. I can still help you in this. Come, come." He beckons. Smiles. "Come." My body makes an instinctive movement to respond.

"How late--"

Focus: "We close at five. Now please do not bother me, because I don't want any more people to drown..." I turn away from my father: "You were a mistake, son. A plot of your mother's." Turn away and toward the pool and look. And there, over there, way over there, a slowly sinking something in the deep end. My body automatically leaps forward, soaring through the air - again, it takes forever to hit the water. When I do, my mouth is straining open and the water whooshes in, choking me - for an instant it feels as if I'm going to drown - but I must reach and save ... the noise of the water rushing by ... but ... where ... the closer I get to the shadow in the water, the farther it recedes, fading.

There's no one there.

People around the pool are staring at me treading water as I look for something that isn't there.

I close my eyes and sink.

I'm beginning to see things that aren't there.

Like before. Long, long, long ago, when it first started, when I was so young everything seemed so intensely alive, including me. And somehow my mother, my father, people around me, life, my life, demanded I blunt my mind to what was before my eyes. Something got inside me: them. Their words, their ideas. I began to see life through their eyes. I was corrupted. At five years old, what I used to see was immediately mine. By ten, what I saw was no longer immediate, but delayed as I filtered it through what others had taught me it was.

The dismal, hopeless life of disappointed adults.

But I did not give up, did not disappear as others seem to do in order to survive. I hid away - my perceptions, my way of feeling, my self. I still survived, but I did not see what was there any longer. The world slowly distorted, its form twisting before my eyes. Life became a land of phantoms and unreal shapes. To survive, so young, I shut down.

I was then given to strangers.

Whom I did not trust.

Yet, day after day, I was let alone to start looking at things again and begin to see them as I saw them. No one was trying to rearrange me. No one stood before me to tell me bleak stories about life or give me emotional nudges about how I should be feeling.

Only then could I come back outside and play with the world.

But because I came back outside someone decided I was better and gave me back to my parents. Arriving home, I heard for the first time the heartbeats. I had no choice but to exist as little as possible, where they couldn't see me, passing myself off as normal. Years of this. Until I found out about the ways of studying the mind: the imprecise science of psychology, an oasis that I leapt into like a hallucinating man in the desert dying of thirst.

I needed the information to survive any further.

But I almost drowned in my head. Saving myself meant retreat. Meant watching the inner battle of their corruption versus my hidden normality. I remember a sentence I've read that has meant so much to me: "Well people are those not with something added on but with nothing taken away." I have felt that so much of my life has been a taking away of parts of me and replacing them with something more useful. Useful to parents, other kids, others, society.

Having a child is one of the worst things that could happen to me, I know it's such a delicate organism, that no matter what I'd do, no matter how I'd handle it, corruption, alteration, would be unavoidable.

Yet - yet - feeling well enough, naively well with Alisa's love and belief in me, I went back to face my parents, watch my new wellness kill their pernicious influence. Only to find they are still stronger. Their bleak lives still sit at the root of my guts.

Smiling, yellow-teethed death beckons. My body reacts, longing to go.

Hold on, Tim. Don't disappear.

Holding on, I am at Alisa's. She is trying to look at my eyes, see inside me, but she can tell I'm not there. She wants me to hear something. "I said I'm going to have a baby." She's grabbing my wrists. "Are we going to do anything about it?"

Do?

"Do you want to keep it?"

"Marry me."

"What?"

"Isn't that the right thing to say?" I want to say the right thing.

"It could be, if you looked as though you meant it."

"Don't I?"

"No. You look as though you want me to have an abortion."

I am staring at the wall behind her, just above her head; it's moving in and out, slightly, very slightly. "Yes. An abortion."

"Is this before or after we get married? Are you being half-crazy again?"

"I don't know. Marry me."

"Now, just a minute, Tim. Are you serious? You've said this marry stuff twice now and I'm going to give you an answer if you don't watch it."

The wall keeps living.

"Marry me," I say. "Marry me," I repeat. "Marry me!" I stand. I want to be normal. A baby is normal. Another chance. Marry me.

The heartbeats.

No longer able to stand it, I go to the wall behind her. I lay my cheek against it and stare closely along the surface. I can see it moving, only slightly, but there. Breathing. So slight Alisa probably can't notice it. I'd be crazy if I told her.

Then close it out, Tim, close the eyes and close it out.

"Tim?"

"Tim?"

The voices, always the voices.

My teeth are chattering as I sit in my chair overlooking the pool.

"Tim?"

I look down from my seat, expecting anything, saying, "We close at--" My boss, in a suit, with his Parks and Recreation necktie.

"I'm here with Mr. Horner to check the cleaning systems and general maintenance for city records...." He stops to have a closer look at me. "Jesus, are you shivering? Are you ill, Tim?"

My teeth won't stop clacking together. Losing control.

Below me, the boss turns to address someone else. "Horner, that's dedication." Back his face comes to me, with a stern but pleased supervisor's smile. "But there's dedication and then there's dedication, Tim. You should go home."

"I am fine."

"All the same, I'll call relief in. You head home."

"I am fine."

"No you're not. That's plain. You go home and take care of yourself. I won't have a valuable employee of mine...."

I go home.

At home, I lock the doors and sit there.

The heartbeats.

I stuff cotton in my ears.

This is the worst part: seated motionless in my living room chair, I clearly see that disturbed part of me - my sanity observing my insanity - one neat compartment looking at the chaos in the next compartment: that which is out of my control. I can see the walls moving, breathing, watch every wall expand

slightly with the intake of air, pumping blood. My hands grip the chair's arms, trying to hold on. Whispering sounds come from everywhere, past the cotton and into my head. Across the living room I hear a low, distant laugh. Coming from the vase, I'm sure, near the TV, with the dying, bright flowers inside. Again, the laugh.

I move in a flash. Reaching the vase. Snatching it by its rim and flinging it across the room. It flies, tumbling over and over through the air, as though in slow motion. Finally, the crash as it explodes against the opposite wall, screams of death suddenly filling the house. I press my palms to my ears; hard, harder.

Till the screaming stops.

I stare at this small destruction. This is not me. Violence is not my true nature. I'm a calm, collected, watchful boy. I always have been. But I'm not staying that way.

Escape.

Still shivering, I return to the pool late at night, when no one's there. I cannot close my eyes; I must search. As I walk along the side of the pool, my teeth chatter, beyond control.

Again something is there that I didn't see. A white skull bobbing in the middle of the pool. I dive, swim. This time it's real. No fading away but there, waiting for me. Reaching, I put my hand into it: it's full of hair, long and in my fingers. I turn the skull round to face me: empty eye sockets stare, dead and white. I push it down. Slowly, resisting, filling with water, it sinks. I put my face into the water and watch the skull float toward the deep end, long hair flowing, until it softly knocks against the bottom and rolls slowly down the slope, coming to a halt on the grille that covers the drain.

I leave it there and swim to the edge of the pool, lift myself out, sit with my legs in the pool. The pressure builds, surging from my guts, up, up, up to my throat. Everything tenses - then I scream and scream and scream, a long, silent scream, mouth stretched wide, not a sound.

The telephone goes off in my living room. My feet move over the broken bits of vase to get to it.

"Hello?"

It's Alisa. She talks, questions, waits for answers I no longer know how to give.

"Tim?"

"Yes."

"I was thinking. I've been talking a little with my boss, Dr. Omundson, and I told her how you've been feeling lately, and she and I thought it would be valuable if you came to have a talk."

"Why?"

"I'm worried about you."

"Me, too."

"You are?"

"I'd better do something about it."

My foot's bleeding.

"What?"

"Do you want me to come by tomorrow and talk?"

"Yes. Will you? Promise?"

I make the right sound.

"Dr. Omundson is very helpful," she adds. "I trust her. Tim?... I love you. Tim?"

I hang up and feel my foot. A jagged hunk of vase has slipped through the flesh and dug itself in. My head has not heard the pain. My mind and my body are going into a total separation. Doctors and hospitals again, if I don't watch it. Lock me up and make me better. I've got no choices. I go to the bathroom, leaving blood over everything. I turn on the light, prop my foot on the side of the bathtub and bend over the wound for a good look. I squeeze. The piece of vase slips out of my flesh and falls with a sharp sound into the tub; then blood running over my toes and dripping on the porcelain. I push and more blood oozes. Bright drops on clean white. I keep pushing, trying to get as much blood as possible out. Out. All of it. Fill the bathtub.

Yet, turning, I am no longer home. I am only where my mind takes and puts me.

I make an effort, and at the pool I smile and nod, controlling the clacking of the teeth. The substitute lifeguard goes home; I mount the chair. Back where I belong.

"Your foot's bleeding."

I nod and smile, controlling the trembling.

I wait patiently for everyone to go.

When they do, I lock them out and I go to the lost and found and search through the huge box there, picking out the lost underwear. The female panties. When I'm dead they'll look back at this and say, "He was a pervert, he deserved to die." Then my father would take comfort. I take each pair and touch it and put it in a small pile. My body, on its own, reacts. The heartbeats and swelling, the disgust and sexual intensity. I take them to the toilets and tear each one up, and I flush them, one by one, away.

I hear someone behind--

I turn from the toilet bowl, removing a last bit of the soft feminine material from my nose, hiding it behind me, its scent in my nostrils, starting to smile and nod in innocence before I see who it is.

My ancient-looking mother sits there in her familiar chair. She shakes her head in weary sadness, having caught me. She motions for me to come to her side.

"My sick little Tim," she says as I come to kneel by her chair. "You believe I damaged you when you were young." She places my head on her lap and strokes my head. "I didn't mean to." She gently takes the last of the panties from my hand and folds it on her knees. "I did my best." And again strokes my hair in her old motherly fashion. As if this is enough. If I am disturbed, and ready to die, any good book on the mind will tell you it's because I was deprived of a wholesome, elemental nurturing: Chapter Three, The Importance of the Mother--

She stops touching me. "I hear you," she says, disgusted. "All that fancy sarcastic talk is the Buckles blood in you." She stares at me a long moment.

"I love you, but you remind me of your father, and I hate him." She shakes her head at how much I'll never understand. "Oh, Timothy," she moans, "Timothy, you'll never understand the troubles of being a mother."

Enough. I stand. No more. I position myself directly before her. She looks up, pathetic and weak. I place my hands together to make a hammer instrument. I swing, and she watches as it comes toward her face: it cracks her across the head. She crumples without a struggle. No blood: perfect. I lift her like a weightless skeleton and take her to the edge of the pool. Drop her in. With a

small plop-and-suck sound, she disappears. I kneel and put my face in the water, watching her sink to the bottom until she's gone.

When I'm certain there's nothing else to do and no one else around to drown, I blink. Hard.

"Yes, Alisa?" I say to the telephone again.

"Where were you yesterday?"

"Yesterday?"

"You said you were going to visit me--"

I push aside a curtain and move my head till just my right eye can see outside. Trees bend in the wind, at night the bare limbs stretch and tremble like the fingers of old people. Hearing a movement behind me, I turn. Somebody's head just disappears behind my bedroom door.

"What?"

Someone laughs, chokes.

I leave the phone and go to the bathtub. The stopper's in; the small puddle of blood is still there. I push some more of my blood from my foot into the tub. It's not filling fast enough.

Behind me, where I cannot see, someone is choking. Ignoring it, I squeeze my foot again.

The drops fall into the pool below.

Atop my tower, I watch the huge red drops fall slowly into the water and explode and sink, round and heavy.

In the water, only a little way off, I notice a wiggling something unwillingly descend. I turn my eyes elsewhere. I cannot prevent death if it is not real.

Lifeguard! Lifeguard!

I close my eyes to look at the flashes of light behind my eyelids. Perhaps when they open I will again be somewhere else. Perhaps, concentrating, I could disappear. Yes, I've done it before. The sounds dim, there is only the faintest heartbeat, the faintest choking sound, yes, drift away into myself and never, never come back....

I hear distant splashes ... I am returning ... I do hear voices. Lifeguard.

There are suddenly two people below me, looking up, pointing, yelling something. The wavy shadow in the water. I nod, agreeing with their voices.

I look harder. There seems to be something down there--

Real.

A single, final heartbeat fills the massive building and halts.

No choking. No sounds.

I whistle - leap - swim: whatever it is is far below. A large breath and I descend. Near the deep-end drain, I reach and grab: a soft young boy glides into my embrace. I lock my arm around his chest and pull, pull upward through the water.

I lay the limp boy on the side of the pool.

The crowd gathers.

"Go call the number on the phone."

I've done this before.

Bending over the boy, I breath into his body. A crying woman kneels beside us.

I breathe and the boy does not.

Time.

Men in white with machines arrive. I sit alone and watch the past happen again.

"I'm sorry, but there's no further...."

The woman takes the lifeless boy into her arms and sobs against his face. I turn; I go back to my tower. I sit, watching for someone else to drown.

A man dressed in a white coat comes to my tower. "Uh, hey, don't you think you'd better close the pool and--" I listen no longer. I stand. Enough.

I dive. I swim to the bottom. My ears hurt from the pressure. The group of corpses and skulls is still there, undulating, waiting. I push some aside and thread my fingers through the narrow grille and hold on. My head begins to hurt. My heartbeats begin to rush, louder, booming. My lungs are running out of oxygen. My system is straining. Good. Even my throat, like some small, desperate animal with its own instincts, makes miniature gulping motions, as though wishing it were receiving air. My heart must burst soon. I will open my mouth and swallow the pool.

Something pulls me. Hands on my body. Fingers grabbing my arms. Others. It is too late.

My heartbeats must cease. My lungs have stopped. My head shall explode. Hands are trying to pry my fingers loose from around the drainage grille. They

have hopes of saving me. Too late. I win. I open my mouth and swallow the pool.

Please let it be too late.