

Time in a Bubble

Chapter 1

He was asleep in a small apartment where the window fan created a breeze. She sketched, eyes flicking between the paper and him. Zoë's hair was a spectacular, straw colored mess. She drew with long, lean lines and remembered his fingers. Some of him leaked out of her. She stared at the curve of his hip and wanted him to turn so that she could draw his balls and penis.

Zoë's thighs were sore. He had squeezed and pawed and humped her. She wanted him to wake up and do it again. She wondered about how she might need him.

Ron's breath was dreamy and Zoë wanted it. The soft light of a full moon illuminated her. He had told her that he would start teaching at Our Lady of the Forlorn later in the week.

That morning, everyone met in the convent. At 10:15, they called Ron. "I must've written the date wrong," he mumbled. "I'll be there right away." He showered and dressed without looking at her. Then he said, "Please wait here until I come back home." She smiled with the thought that she might not have to put clothes on at all today. She could look into everything that he owned, and when he came back home she would fuck him.

There were figurines and a red feather mixed with crumbs and ashes on a wooden desk that was covered with a paisley cloth. Some records were scratched and scattered in and out of jackets. An after-smell of tobacco and pot mingled with the ripeness in the sheets. Piles of books, some with papers wedged between their pages, were stacked on the floor. Unkempt plants that tangled and flowered reached out to watermarks on the wall and to a tin ceiling that was painted over.

He drove through Newark's metal and concrete mix with a flood of hometown familiarity and in a panicky sweat. He was going somewhere that he'd been before. This was so very strange. He'd been sent to this school in 7th grade after being caught with a knife, now he was coming back to teach in the high school and he was late. He knew that wouldn't go over all that well with the nuns. Parking in one of the playground spots that were reserved for faculty, he looked over at the door of the church where he'd been marched with the rest of his classmates to pray during the Cuban Missile Crisis. He gazed at the towering oaks that lined the street and whose roots buckled the pavement. Looking up into the

long comforting embrace of leaf lined branches, he tripped over the edge of an upturned sidewalk slab that sent him sprawling. His hands slapped down hard onto the stone and he snarled, "Fuck!" as he lay like some overly zealous penitent just as Father Joyce, who was carrying Communion wafers for the sick, came out of the church's heavy door. Ron looked up in disheveled dismay as the veteran priest shook his head and walked around him. The fall had torn loose the sole of his shoe causing it to make a double slapping sound as he tried to walk.

"Great!" he said to himself, "I'm going to walk in and announce my presence with the authority of a clown. Maybe I can find a rubber ball to wear on my nose."

The great room had a low ceiling, passageways that led off like spider legs. Crucifixes and portraits of saints with a variety of lighted halos hung on the walls over cut flowers. The incensed aroma was cool in contradiction to the temperature. The nuns were in their summer linen whites. One or two still wore the full headpiece that included the face frame and bib, but most had moved to the revealing below the knee hemline and abbreviated cap that the older nuns sneeringly referred to as "stewardess' outfits." They sat in the room with the empty cups of coffee that had been provided for those who had been on time. About twenty-five of them seated and everyone one of their heads turned to watch Ron limp into the room with his slapping heel.

He entered with a stumbling burst that reset one's equilibrium. Sister Irene Emanuel looked at him over the top of her glasses and thought that he looked healthy in an annoying kind of way. Then she realized that he also smelled of smoke.

Sister Vincent Salvatore, seeing a man enter the room, could not help but get to her feet and move to bring him coffee. Irene Emanuel noted the gesture... "Mr. Tuck, thank you for coming" she said in her unmistakable tone. Then, knowing that it would be expected that she make some note of his tardiness added, "Not a particularly auspicious beginning for you."

Automatically, Ron said "Good morning. No, not at all, Sister." The tone in his voice put the room at ease. It was masculine but contrite and respectful, or at least it seemed so. He took a seat and was handed a folder. He took it with his scraped and bleeding hand. The nun that passed it to him looked at the traces of blood that had smeared onto the freshly copied white paper with a look of repulsion that she normally reserved for vomit.

The rest of the day was a blur except for when he saw his classroom. It was wooden; there was a podium; it had long and wide windows; there was a flag and a cross.

He was attracted by the smell of chalk and the feel of slate. After the windows went up on their clicking chains, the city birds called in from branches and porches. He lit a cigarette before he thought about it, tossing the match out the window.

Sister Juliana Marie looked up from her student's new baby and saw him standing in the window smoking. A scowl of disapproval crumpled her face. This lout was standing in his classroom smoking cigarettes. What was next? Was he going to strip down to his underwear to escape the heat? She rose and silently walked down to the principal's office fingering the beads that belted her habit.

Ron stood under the Lincoln portrait that he'd hung next to a crucifix in the room. Even though it was 90 degrees and he was dressed in a sports jacket and tie and the heat was plastering the cotton shirt to his back, he felt that he was where he belonged and where he wanted to be. He raised his eyes to the Lincoln and the crucifix and said to neither in particular, "Please don't let me screw these kids up."

By mid afternoon, Ron noticed that the school had emptied. He'd been copying the names of the 117 students that would be in his classes. He'd thought about what he needed to accomplish on day one. He wanted to read the stories for a 3rd time before he began them tomorrow. He wanted a cigarette. He wanted to stop being Mr. Tuck for the day.

One by one, the nuns with whom he'd be teaching had come to the door to introduce themselves. Ron inhaled the fresh clean smell of their linen. He appreciated the quiet invitations that they offered. How could he have forgotten that he'd need paper? They would show him where the books were stored. Neatly stacked towers of white pages and blue covers, red covers, and sleek silver gilded pages that Ron wandered through; fingertips sliding across the books, mind trying to imagine who would open them.

He drove back to Elizabeth in silent reverie. Zoe was sitting naked in the middle of a floor that was filled with charcoal sketches. Fleeting portraits of him as he slept that featured just a line or two of detail. Still life drawings of his plants woven into self portraits of her face and the massive tangle of thick blonde hair that was smudged with charcoal and fastened with rubber bands. She crawled to the door when she saw him and nuzzled his feet and calves. She didn't say words. She uttered soft sounds that pled for attention. He felt and saw her crawl around him and wanted nothing in the world more than to have her for his own.

Chapter 2

The bursts of energy that pulsed through the halls on the opening day of school kick started the old buildings like jumper cables that were fed by a nuclear power plant. Everywhere, young girls were laughing in nervous, giggly groups. The nuns were radiantly smiling and hugging their returning charges. Ron felt eyes on him at every moment. There was no sense in trying to blend in. How could he blend in? He was the only male in the school. The bell sent people scattering like careening bits of mercury. Ron stood in back of his podium. His hands were sweating. His collar was tight. He wanted a cigarette. The girls sitting in front of him duly rose at the sound of Sister Irene's voice. "Ladies, welcome back to school. Your teachers and I have been anxiously awaiting your return. Let us pray for the health of our families, for the souls of those who have walked these halls before us and for our continued dedication to the shaping of our lives and the lives around us. Let us pray. We ask our Heavenly Father and the Blessed Virgin for guidance" Everyone blessed themselves. Ron remembered how to do it. He felt his jaw twitch as he looked down and mumbled his way through the Lord's Prayer, and then a Hail Mary, and then a Glory Be. He heard the quizzical cacophony as some of his students prayed in rattling Spanish. Then Sister Irene's voice said, "When you have completed your homeroom paperwork, please send attendance sheets to the main office. For today and today only, we will delay that start of classes until we have received all of the homeroom sheets."

His first class was 9th grade reading. There were twenty-eight students in the class and twenty-nine chairs. Ron Tuck smiled his dimpled grin as they entered the room. They looked down shyly when they saw him smile at them and some of them squirmed in their chairs like they had to go to the bathroom. The faces were white and brown and black and combinations of all of those. It did not take Ron long to discover that in this Reading class, that was using a 9th grade literature book, only about one half of the students knew enough English to carry on a conversation. Mostly, they just spoke Spanish. He looked down at the copious notes that he had prepared on the first three stories and realized that they were absolutely of no use to him. Then his brain began to whirl with a high speed that was as strange as it was exhilarating. "Ok, who here can understand every word that I'm saying?" More

than half the hands shot straight up proudly waving in the air. "Great," said Ron smiling and making fleeting eye contact with each and every one of them. "Now how many of you would be able to understand the same words if they were written in a book in English?" About half of the hands sadly lowered. The girls, looking around to see who was still among the chosen, gave a couple of eye rolls at those who still had their hands up in the air but were lying. Ron had it in his head now. "Those of you with your hands up, please stand along the back of the classroom."

A tall girl with very dark hair that was swept back into a shoulder length tangle had a look of intensity on her face that drew Ron to her.

"You are?"

"Elena."

"Do you speak Spanish, Elena?"

Everyone in the class laughed and Elena's dark eyes were dancing and she laughed with them. "We all speak Spanish, Mr. Tuck."

Ron looked at her evenly. "I don't. Am I the only one here that doesn't speak Spanish?"

Six or seven hands went into the air. Ron saw that those girls did not have Hispanic features. "So Elena, what do you think we should do to help everybody?"

"I don't know what you mean," said Elena.

Ron looked at them and said. "We are going to break some rules today. First of all I want you to sit with your friends and not in the alphabetical order that I've put you in." He intoned. "That wasn't real bright of me was it?" The girls laughed cause of the way that he said it, and because of the dramatic look of self loathing that comically swept across his face when he said it, and because all of the teachers in the school always put them in alphabetical order. "Here are the new rules. You sit with your friends and if you have more than one friend you sit with the one that speaks the least amount of English. If you haven't any friends that don't speak English, you tell me and I will assign you to someone."

"Do we have to sit with someone who doesn't speak English," said a freckled girl with red hair and glasses. "I mean suppose we don't want to?"

Ron felt an instant tension in the room. Spanish words from the back that he couldn't understand and the sharp turn of heads. Ron walked towards the girl smiling, and then with a wink of his eye and a flash of his grin that he settled just on her, he said very softly, "I need you to help me. Wouldn't you like to help me?" He saw the girl begin to grin and heard some laughter in the room.

One of the Spanish girls who had a silver streak running through her dark hair said, "I'll bet she would help you do anything."

Mocking laughter bounced off the walls of the class. The red haired girl blushed furiously. Ron went back to the podium. "Here's the thing. It's not good to be dumb. Nobody wants to be thought of as dumb. Knowing language is a way to not appear to be dumb. Language is a way that can help you get what you want. That's my job, to help you get what you want." He said it so earnestly and looked right into the eyes when he said it. They couldn't help but believe him.

The class was over just as Ron was getting comfortable with his students. "I need more time," he said to himself as he watched them file out. But then there was another group who was filing in and it started all over and Ron learned that what he'd just done could be done more smoothly the second time.

The reactions weren't exactly the same, but the gist of it was, and by lunchtime he had discovered the power of his smile with them. It was a tool. It was an ally. He could buy time with it. He could change the mood of everyone in the room with it. Ron thought that maybe it was too much power to have but he liked it and if he didn't misuse it, what was the harm?

His schedule said that he had lunch now. He looked up at the clock. Lunch? It was 10:40 in the morning and he had lunch?

As he walked up the wide worn wooden staircase, several girls hurried passed him. None of them failed to look at him. Ron thought that he would have to start ignoring the looks.

Making his way to the room marked faculty lunchroom, Ron had no idea of what to expect. All he really hoped for was an ashtray and a place to get some coffee. Both were available. The Mr. Coffee pot was half-filled and Ron selected one of the freshly washed mugs that were turned upside down on a linen napkin that was spread over a small countertop. The nuns did not use this room; they went back to the convent or stayed in their classrooms during lunch. This was for lay faculty. Ron grinned thinking he was one of the lays.

A round table that comfortably seated six or could squeeze in eight was covered with a clean plastic tablecloth. Ron took his coffee and slid in next to a washed out bleached blonde who sat curled over her coffee over her coffee cup puffing vigorously on a cigarette. She said, "I'm Doris, we met briefly yesterday before the penguins carried you off."

Nodding, Ron said, "Hi how ya doin?"

"I'm wondering if they've used deodorant since June."

Ron didn't know what to answer to that and so he said nothing and lit a cigarette. Doris waited until two more teachers came into the room before she repeated her quip about body odor.

"You just have to desensitize your nose again Doris," said Marsha, a husky brunette with dark plastic rimmed glasses.

"The first place I'm headed when I get out of here is the shower," said Doris.

Ron wished that she would go now. Then he saw Marsha looking over at him and his coffee. She said coldly without introducing herself, "The coffee club is 3 dollars a week and you are responsible to bring and wash your own cup. Ron nodded and then saw that Marsha was still staring at his coffee mug. He looked down at it too and then back up into her fleshy face.

"Did I use yours?"

"You used somebody's"

"That was a mistake," he said quickly getting up and pouring the remainder of the cup into the sink and rinsing out the mug. It was a cursory sloshing of water that did not by either Doris or Marsha's standards constitute a wash, but he was oblivious to them and set the mug, still dripping back on the once fresh linen. Then he walked out the door.

"Where did she get him? said Marsha.

"With what they pay here, what do you expect?" answered Doris.

Ron's next class was senior English and this was a different story altogether. The twenty two girls who came into the room wore uniforms that were tight through their hips and across their breasts. They were last year's uniforms and the girls hated them except that they could hike the skirts up and take them in so that their breasts seemed to be bursting to get out and bounce and sway and be free. They looked at Ron differently too. They had all seen him before class; they had made sure of that. This was the guy that the frosh girls, some of whom were their younger sisters and cousins, were talking about, were looking dreamy and goo-goo eyed about. But these girls were different. They drove. They had real boyfriends. Some worried monthly about becoming pregnant. Some had learned that there were less dangerous ways to keep their boyfriends happy and satisfied. They were organized.

When he stood in front of them and began calling the roll, their looks were so obvious and powerful that Ron retreated back behind his podium, anything to give himself a little distance between them and him. This was senior English and that meant English literature. After they'd each filled out their cards and gotten

their books and said their names, Ron looked at them for a long moment and then said, "Page 6, Beowulf. Here's the question. What's a monster?" He looked up at them from the text. They looked down. He could play too and he knew how to look into a girl's face just long enough to have the tingle of his eyes and smile begin to work on her. Then he looked up and said again, "What makes someone or something a monster?"

"Ask my stepfather, said Andrea who wasn't buying his act. She'd stop him right in his tracks with the first thing that she said. But Ron seemed oblivious to the overtones of her comment.

He continued, "Is a monster born a monster? Do you know monsters? Are any of you monsters?" Then he began to pace as if he was in deep thought. He walked up and down the aisles, checking to make sure that they all had the books that the students were required to purchase every year, new or used. Most of the girls had used ones that came with at least one year's worth of notes and, if you were lucky, a copy of most of the tests. But there was nothing written in any of the margins that was going to help them. Ron said, "Tonight start reading Beowulf, but for now, he strode quickly to side table where the stack of paper that he'd been given yesterday was waiting. "Write to me about what you know about monsters."

"You mean like King Kong or Godzilla?"

"Or the Creature from the Black Lagoon," said Ron, with a reference that none of them got. I'll tell you story," said Ron. "When I was a kid growing up down on Broadway," he started lining up his street credits, "we thought that there were monsters that lived in the empty storage bins in the basement. And we used to dare each other to go down there without turning on the lights. Do you think that there were real monsters down there or were we making them up?"

Chapter 3

At home, he turned on the fan, turned on the radio, lit a cigarette and began to read about their monsters. They had trouble forming sentences and when they did get a complete thought down it seemed vacuous. "... my monsters wait for me to forget that they are watching, and then they snatch at me." He looked at the name, it was Andrea. He couldn't connect it to a face. Then he called Zoe.

"Please say that you are going to come and take me out of here," was the first thing that she said.

He answered, "I'm on the way."

In his car, she straddled his lap and shrouded him under her hair. He swelled up for her and kissed her neck and her lips and her chin. She bit his ear and then curled up against the door and said, "Take us somewhere that we can be alone and naked."

He said, "Have you eaten?"

"Yes," she said quickly.

Back in his apartment, on the sofa bed that was always open, after he'd been inside of her with his tongue and fingers and cock, she whispered, "Do you know how to tie me up?"

He grinned, "I'll learn."

She guided him as he took one of his belts and wrapped it around her thighs and another that he buckled tightly across her nipples. He yanked on them as he slid in between her bonded cheeks and stuck himself right into her ass. He moved slowly and she clung to him as best as the belts would let her.

They bathed and then they showered and then he read papers and essays while she sketched him over and over. She wanted that wave of light brown hair and the soft angles and hollows of his cheeks and the long eyelashes that sometimes gave him the look of a harlot. His hard round little ass and the thick thighs and scarred knees called to her eyes. She sketched all of him and showed him what she saw. While he read, he preened for her.

When he needed to go to sleep she said, "I grew up on your poetry. My sister and Laureen read it to me all the time." Ron was stunned. He looked at her as if she had spoken a language that was made up of ideas that were foreign to him. He understood the words individually but he couldn't grasp what they meant when put together and directed at him.

"Didn't you used to show Laureen your poetry and give her copies of what you'd written?"

Ron still didn't seem to understand. He nodded his head. He searched her face with his eyes waiting for the joke, waiting to hear that she was teasing him, waiting for a Julian T. Willy comment like maybe he should find a job as a plumber, or a Warren Lashly scrawl across a page of free verse with the word "SHIT." written in accusing, heavy red ink, but she was serious.

"I think I fell in love with Ron Tuck the poet before I ever met you," she said secretively. "Would you read some of it for me? I've never heard you read and I've imagined how some of them would sound."

Cautiously, he said, "Which ones?"

She opened the back of her portfolio. Ron watched, his eyes caressing the thick, thick blonde hair and marveling at the way her glasses accented the slender bones of her face. His mind was spinning like a tilt-a-wheel that was lifting up into the night sky of an amusement park on a soft summer night. Voices inside of him were exhaling shouts of excited glee.

He'd been back at Rahway just a few nights ago. Laureen had asked him to come over and to help move a couch. It was old and stained with cat piss. He got it to the curve of the stairs where it was wedged when Zoe had come in the front door. Laureen was having trouble putting enough pressure on the end to force it through and Ron was using most his bulk to pull, but what it needed was a harder push. Zoe had jumped right in to help. Before he even knew who she was, he had put his hands on her waist and lifted her up over the couch to help Laureen. He remembered the way that her hips felt just then and the way that she had smiled at him. Zoe was very strong and her additional force had made the task easy. The three of them had coffee and then Ron said that he was going to The Cove to listen to Morris Nanton play piano. Laureen said that she didn't want to go, but to Ron's shock, Zoe had been eager to go with him.

She selected a very old poem that he'd written about his cat, Leni. She looked at the page as Ron recited it for her. Her eyes were wide with appreciation. Then she said, "I always say this as kind of a children's poem and I wanted to illustrate it."

Ron wasn't sleepy anymore. He was in love.

Chapter 4

Across the street from the high school was a corner coffee shop. The girls piled in there at the end of the day, unbuttoning their tops and hiking up their skirts even more for the collection of males that waited for them. The place had the heavy Latino aroma of beans and rice, fried plantains, and Cuban sandwiches. Lots of things happened in the candy store. Gambling, street drugs, contacts who knew where to get guns, people who dreamed of the death of Fidel and their return to their long lost home, talk of baseball and soccer. The nuns never entered the place. The lay teachers were afraid of it, but Ron needed a place to get his coffee and he had already decided that the faculty room wasn't for him. So, twice a day, once in the morning before school, and once at lunch he entered the place to the suspicious

stares of the collection of men who weren't sure why he was there. But the girls were always thrilled to see him.

That Friday morning he made his first entrance. The girls had told him that it was the only place around where he could get a good container of coffee.

"Mr. Tuck, I want you to meet my brother, Edwardo and this is Jimmy my brother's friend" said Elena, placing Jimmy's arm around her waist.

"It's good to meet you, Edwardo," said Ron, sticking out his hand.

Edwardo shook his hand politely. "Like Elena said, I'm her brother and this is Jimmy, her boyfriend."

Ron smiled and extended his hand to Jimmy. Elena seemed about ten years older in the store than she had appeared to be in his class. In the store, she was a hot woman who knew the needs of men.

"Elena is a talented student. I'm sure that you're proud of her."

"Thank you," said Edwardo. "We are very proud of her and of all the girls in the neighborhood, Mr. Tuck. You just here to get coffee?"

"Yeah," said Ron smiling and taking his container and trying to pay for it. But the man behind the counter said, "You teach my daughter, Connie. It wouldn't be right to take money from you."

Ron smiled and kept his dollar bill extended. "I need you to take it so that I can feel free to come back."

Everyone was watching. The counterman took Ron's bill and made change. "Connie will study her vocabulary at night with the rest of us," said the man. "She says that you care about what she learns." The man emptied the change into Ron's hand adding, "I care about what she learns too, Mr. Tuck."

Ron wasn't sure if it was a warning or a compliment but he took his container to his fire escape and ripped a V into the lid, lit a cigarette and rested his head against the metal. He could hear the music coming out of the store. Then he heard the buzzer that said his lunch was over.

Edwardo grabbed Elena's arm as she started out the door. "Don't let that American man fill your head up," he said.

"No," said Elena lightly. "I'll keep my head just the way you like it, all empty and pretty."

When she left Edwardo said to Jimmy, "Why my fourteen year old smart-assed sister is somebody you want is a mystery to me."

"Elena knows who she is," said Jimmy. "Don't worry about her."

Edwardo took a step back and raised his hands palms up. "I'm not worried but maybe you should be." His accent had the singsong of bravado and gentle mockery.

All day long, Ron tested them. They were to use dictionaries to help them write. They could use Spanish to English dictionaries if they needed to. Ron was hungry for their essays. He wanted their thoughts. He wanted them to get used to writing for him. He'd devised a question for each class. He hadn't planned the questions. He'd planned the test. But when it came time to put the question on the board he seemed to know what it was and wrote it out almost automatically. The girls left his classes that day complaining that their hands and heads hurt. Ron laughed at them and they pouted for him. He loved the way that they pouted because it always ended with a turn of their heads and a dark eyed smile that wished him a good weekend.

Now he was sitting in back of his desk arranging the piles of papers and Sister Irene appeared in his doorway. "How was your first week, Mr. Tuck? Are you planning to stay with us?"

Ron felt a flush of fear wash through his body and he froze at the sound of her words, "Yes, Sister."

"Then I suppose you'd better have this," she said and handed him his check. Father Smith liked to give the teachers a week's pay at the end of the first week of school, even though the pay period was every two weeks. It had been a long summer and the check was the boost that some of them needed. Ron was amazed when he stared at the check. They'd given him money for teaching.

Chapter 5

He left the school but instead of driving west to pick up the parkway and head home, he drove north towards an older home. He stopped at the four corners that marked the first school that he'd ever attended, Elliott Street School. It was a three story brick and concrete place that was it was filled with spray painted graffiti now, and there was trash in front of the doors. It looked deserted. It was an old building whose last real renovation had been completed in 1905. Ron got out of his car and walked to one of the entrances that he remembered. This was where they were dismissed from when he had shop. It was right here that he'd fought Paul Peterson and had pushed his face into the dirt and made him lick the sidewalk with

his tongue while kids stood around and laughed. A guard approached Ron as he stood in the vestibule looking at the metal cages that surrounded the staircase.

"What you lookin' for?" said the short man with a broad chest and a cigar stub stuck in the side of his mouth.

"I used to go to school here," said Ron.

"Not, no more," said the janitor/security person.

"Can I see the gym?" said Ron.

"What you want there?"

"I want to see the balcony and the indoor track that wrapped around it."

"We don't run no sight seein' tours, you know man."

"I know. I'm sorry," said Ron. "I'm teaching down the street. I loved this place."

"Ain't too many people lovin it now, Mister Teaching Down the Street"

"Yeah, I know. It's Friday. I just cashed my first paycheck ever for teaching anyone anything and I was right here."

The security officer looked him up and down. He did look like a teacher. He was harmless and the man thought that with the broom in his hand and the knife in his pocket he wasn't frightened. If he didn't show the guy around, he would be sweeping the floor and suppose this guy knew somebody. "Come on then," he said. "Ain't no one been up in that balcony for 10 years. It's all condemned. But I'll take you up there."

Upon entering, Ron could immediately hear Mr. Kloss's voice intoning the names of the relay teams. "Army, Navy, Notre Dame, and Cal." Ron could fly and he could kick and hit and throw and when he didn't miss school cause of his asthma, he could make Mr. Kloss smile with his agility and strength. "Why are you absent so much, Tuck?"

"I get sick."

"Getting sick is a weakness, boy. You can't afford to get sick in a foxhole."

"I'm gonna suspend you from safety patrol for two weeks, Ron. You're sick too much."

"Yes Sir, Mr. Kloss. I won't get sick anymore. Can I have my belt back after that? It was a single shoulder around the waist strap that Ron had bleached so that it was bone white.

"We'll see what happens," said Mr. Kloss.

Ron liked the hot chocolate that the safety patrol got on cold mornings and that the girls in the home economics class that's served them. There was Elaine Tadeo and the way she smiled and put a second marshmallow in his cup. Later that

year, Ron had thrown rocks at her to prove to his friends that he didn't really like her, but when the black kids from Broadway Junior had come up there looking for the pretty Italian girls, Ron went home at lunch and came back with a butcher knife, ready to keep anyone who came near to Elaine far away. He'd gotten caught right outside the iron mesh grated window. His mother had called the school frantic that a knife was missing. The cops had told Ron that he would be in trouble at Broadway Junior and they sent him down the street. Ron looked at the window where he's hit the softball further than anyone except Paul Peterson, who he'd made lick the sidewalk. He flushed and went down the stairs and back to his car.

Halleck Street was a shambles. He and Rich had played stickball here every day. This was where he'd first played football. This was where he'd told the rest of the team to line and throw him the ball and try to stop him. He ran hard and they had shied away. He knew what it was like to crash into a body or to have one crash into you and he longed for it. Now it was broken rubble, like the ruins he read about in Rome and Greece.

He was up on Rich's door and knocking at it before he realized that he was there. There were bars on the windows and the small Italian woman was hunched over in back of the bolted door.

"It's Ron Tuck," he said.

She opened the door with a huge smile. "Ronald, how wonderful to see you. Come in, come in!"

"Mrs. D'Orio, I really didn't think that you were still here."

"We don't give up easily, Ronald. How is your mother?"

Ron put his head down respectfully. This woman had fed him on more nights that he could remember and when she came out into the back yard and had asked if Ron wanted to stay for dinner, he had always shouted a triumphant 'Yes.' Now her place looked worn and torn up and used passed the point where it should have been left alone. Wallpaper hung in puffed peels in the hallway. The kitchen looked like something was crawling in it. The smells were old and not fresh and clean the way that Ron remembered them. The rooms were dark and small and Ron had remembered almost feeling like he was in the country when he'd been at the D'Orio house. She was now old and scared and Ron wondered how Richie could have ever let this happen. She seemed to have a lump on her back that was stretched over an old sweater and a plaid housedress with a raveled hem. Her lips were shaking.

"My mother is good. I was just in the neighborhood, Mrs. D'Orio."

"Can you stay and have dinner, Ron"

"No, Ma'am, I got to be getting back now"

"Have you seen my Richie? You're always welcome here Ronald."

"No, Ma'am, but please give him my best."

Ron turned and walked away from the place.

"Come back anytime, Ronald."

He didn't answer. He drove down to where Halleck Street met Broadway and then north towards Belleville.

Ron looked for his building. The gas station across the street was gone and the diner had been demolished. His basement apartment stood in back of an 8 foot high chain link fence with razor wire that ran along the top of it. It was a battle zone and no place for his memories.

Chapter 6

Elton John was singing "Don't Go Breakin' My Heart" with some English girl as Ron's car snaked its way up the hills into New Providence. He knew the ride to Zoe's house now, and as soon as he pulled up she was out the door and running towards him with a large duffle bag thrown over her shoulder. She was wearing tan shorts, a white cotton shirt, no socks and runner's shoes. Her hair gave her the look of a halo as she pulled his door open, threw her bag into the back seat and kissed him. "I was waiting for you all day," she said smiling. Ron laced his fingers between hers as he drove and they listened to Paul Simon say that there were "50 Ways to Leave Your Lover."

"What do you want to do?" said Ron.

Zoe smiled and brought his hand between her legs. She pressed the backs of his knuckles to the swollen lips inside of the light fabric. She moved his hand up and down and closed her eyes, and then she smiled over at him coyly. Ron had already lain in the fastest route back to his house. She was already taking off her clothes as he put the key into the door. He heard the telephone ringing. She wore no bra, no panties. She pulled off the runner's shoes and dove into his bed as he picked up the phone.

"Hey man," said Quimpy. "Where the hell have you been?"

"I ain't been around much Quimp. What's happening?"

"You need some extra cash?" said Quimpy. He was sitting in his apartment at the kitchen table. There was a bottle of wine open and a half finished pizza box on the table. He was smoking a joint and stroking his black beard with a smile as he spoke.

Sure,” said Ron. “What’s the deal?”

“Tutoring kids who are fucked up. I figured you’d be a natural.”

Ron laughed. “Of course, I’d love it but I got this gig teaching in Catholic school.”

“This would be after school,” said Quimpy. “Can you meet me down at the alley tonight?”

Ron shook his head. “Not tonight, man.” It was the first time that Quimpy could ever remember Ron not being willing to come and meet him.

“How about tomorrow?”

“Maybe,” said Ron. “I’m not sure.”

Ron was being too evasive and Quimpy said, “You shacked up or something?”

“Yup,” said Ron.

Quimpy laughed. “Alright well that explains it. Look gimme a call over the weekend or stop up. I’ll be around on Sunday for the games.”

“I will,” said Ron. He felt Zoe tugging at his clothes and laughed. “I gotta go, man.”

Quimpy laughed too. “See you on Sunday.” He put down the phone and picked up the ever present nail file that was always in a mug on his table. He began to work the cuticles of his right hand. They were always an obsession. He wanted them long. He didn’t care about dirt under his nails, but he wanted the curve to be just right so that when he lifted the ball, the nails gave his fingertips just the right amount of support to follow through. It made the ball finish strong. He put down the nail file, picked up his keys, finished his last swallow of wine and headed out the door. Friday night was a scratch 375 pairs league at Welmont. He felt ready.

When Ron got off the phone, Zoe pulled him onto the bed and then lay on her belly. “I’ve been so naughty all day that you should spank me,” she said. Ron stared as she lifted her bottom and then pressed it down onto the mattress.

“I should?” said Ron. He’d never spanked anyone, but the idea seemed erotic and she was lifting her bottom up in the air and then pressing her pelvis down onto the mattress in a way that that was making his cock twitch in his pants. He crawled up across the bed to her. He moved his palm over her cheeks gently. She made them go up and down faster. Then he slapped her ass.

The flesh against flesh feel gave a sting to his hand but she moaned the way that she did when he put his cock in her and gyrated her hips in a circle on his bed. He raised his hands again and slapped down harder than he did the first time. He was surprised at the way that the sound bounced off of the walls. He stared at her

cheeks. There was a slight glow where his hand had slapped her and he felt his cock get unbelievably hard in his pants. It was sticking against his zipper. He opened the button of his jeans and pulled down his zipper. She saw what he was doing and squirmed over to him, pressing her lips to exhale warm breath against his stretched tight jockey shorts. He slapped her ass again and she wriggled, pressed her nose in between her thighs where his balls were full tight and murmured, "That felt so good. Do it again."

Ron's hand was a blur as he raised and lowered it against her cheeks. She kissed his thighs and let her hair spread out against them and over his belly; she exhaled warm breath against the fabric and dragged her hair back and forth, squirming and moaning.

Quimpy got into his 1963 Pink Convertible Cadillac. The long sleek fins sliced into the night as he drove with the top down and his black hair trailing behind him. The car was smooth and Quimpy stroked his beard appreciative of the silence of the ride as he thought about tonight's games. He was throwing the ball good. If Buster just didn't get crazy, they could win the league. The idea of Buster and not crazy was an oxymoron that amused Quimpy. Buster was always a fucking nut, playing lines that made his ball work harder than it had to, and just killing the pocket all night long from the wrong angle. Stubborn Polish fuck that he was. Quimpy pulled into a parking space in the lot, far away from anyone else's car. He didn't want to give anybody any excuses.

Ron's hand slapped down hard on Zoe's ass again and this time she writhed for him and said, "Please, please do it to me now."

Quimpy's ball drove into the pocket with purpose. Pins splattered like shacks against the surge of a tsunami.

"Nine in a row," said Butchie. "You got three more in those lucky cakes of yours?"

"We'll see," said Quimpy, stroking his beard. "But we both know your bet, even with the ridiculous spot, is history."

"I know, Cakes," said Butchie. "But you still got to be feelin tight in the collar." Quimpy smiled at Butchie "I ain't tight. You already paid for my night.

Ron's had slapped down hard on her raised ass. His left hand had grabbed hold of her hair like it was reins. His cock was driving in and out of her and his right hand was slapping her raised red cheeks with the tempo of his thrusts. He was riding her and she was moaning and panting, lubrication leaking out her. Quimpy mounted the approach and felt himself drifting slightly to the right as he moved toward the foul line. He adjusted by giving his arm just a slightly harder lift,

fingers coming out after his thumb slipped free, the ball sliding and then catching its line, churning fast and hooking, catching the head pin and sending it careening off the side wall and then bouncing back to take out the 5 pin, the deck a dancing gyrating collision of wood that cleared and left everything spinning and down on the deck.

A cheer rose up in back of him. The house had stopped and gathered to watch. Everyone wanted to be there for perfection or the anguish of coming this close to perfection. A perfect game in a league earned you a diamond ring. Sal was watching from the next pair. He hated Quimpy but looked down at the perfect 300 that he wore instead of his wedding band, twirled it once and hoped silently for failure. The more exclusive the club was, the more he liked being a member.

Ron's hips were quivering like he was a feral thing. The electricity between them was sending jolts through their bodies. With each slap and thrust and backward coiling and tug on her hair and moans that came from deep inside of them where their organs were joined and desperately in need of each other and of yet another release. He felt like he was a heated piece of wood inside of her. Every inch of him was tense. She was bouncing her hot, red cheeks back against him when he felt the release shoot out of him like the hose of a pump that was just under too much pressure. Hot seed blasted into her, he bucked harder and the second blast sent him lurching on top of her. She was crying now and wanting him to not stop to not ever stop.

The ball was dead in the pocket. The expectant cheer that went up from the crowd was silenced by the stiff straight unmoving defiance of a 10 pin that looked like it must be a mirage because of the way everything else had blown off the deck and into the pit. Sal smiled and got up to throw his ball. Excitement over! Quimpy screamed down the lane, "Motherfucker!" He kicked the ball rack as the collection of appreciative faces dissolved into business as usual on Friday night.

Chapter 7

On Saturday morning, Zoe told Ron that she wanted to run. "I know a place," said Ron. They got into his car and drove up the parkway towards his parents' house. The high school field in back of the house had a quarter mile track that wrapped around a football field and a baseball diamond and a softball field. Ron said, "I haven't run in a long time. He was wearing a bathing suit and a sweat shirt over a t-shirt. He wore an old pair of sneakers. He couldn't remember the last time

that he had them on. Zoe looked resplendent. Her thick blonde hair hung loose over her shoulders, her legs were thin and muscular. She had borrowed one of his t-shirts and tied it at her waist. "Let me watch you run around just once," she said. Ron started off tentatively. The track did not hold good memories for him. Embarrassments of having dry heaves, of having his knee buckle while he was jogging with the team rushed over him. Now she would be there to watch. She would see it all. She wouldn't want him. She would look at him like he was a pathetic mess.

He started off anyway, looking down at the way that his feet struck the cinders of the track. He wasn't gonna let it beat him again. If he ran until his heart exploded, he wasn't gonna let it beat him. To his amazement, his body moved with a light footed grace and he circumnavigated the track almost before he was out of breath. She was sitting in the wooden bleachers watching and her smile was as broad as a sunrise coming up over a hill on a summer morning. "You're an athlete," she said coming over to him. "I can see it in your stride. It's strong and solid." Ron blushed. He had not thought of himself as an athlete for a very long time. Then she said, "You run clockwise and I'll run counterclockwise. That way nobody will be trying to keep up with anyone else."

Ron laughed. "I'm not silly enough to think that I can keep up with you. You finished the Boston Marathon and I just ran my first quarter mile since Nixon was President."

She laughed and bounded off. He watched the cute little jiggle of her cheeks and that erotic sway of her hair as it brushed back and forth and bounced on her back. Then he ran too, in the other direction. He felt his breath started to give out and was breathing hard when they passed each other for the first time. She smiled and held her hand out as she neared him. They slapped palms and Ron kept running. He pushed and then the most amazing thing happened. He felt his breath slow and his heart settle in his chest. He saw the track and felt the cool air speed past him. He heard birds and smelled the fresh cut of the grass and then they were passing each other again. Ron sped up. He felt himself start to lose his breath and slowed just a little. His breathing returned to the comfort zone and he felt like his feet weren't touching the ground anymore although he could hear the soft slap of his old sneakers on the track.

He didn't know how far he ran but he stopped because his legs started to get wobbly, not because his breathing was giving out and then he walked. The first wave of retching, body shaking coughs hit him about 30 seconds later. They doubled him over. Leaning against the wooden bleachers, palms flat on the wooden

slabs, Ron coughed and coughed until he was dizzy. Then he straightened up and breathed in deeply. Another burst of body shaking heaves coughed their way out of him. He staggered. Then he breathed in again and it was clear and he felt a wave of euphoria warm his body with a sensation that he'd never in his life felt. She was flying around the track now, her hair no longer touching her shoulders but spread out in back of her in golden plumes. Smiling like he'd just smoked opium, he sat in the bleachers breathing easily, feeling each intake and exhale of air like it was the sweetest food he'd ever taken.

After what seemed like an hour she finally stopped and simply walked over to him. She wasn't breathing hard. She was hardly sweating, but she was smiling broadly.

"How far did you run," said Ron.

She grinned. "I don't know. Till I got bored."

Ron stared at her in complete amazement. What was she doing with him? Why did she want him? How could he ever keep up with her?

"How far did I run?" said Ron.

"I think a mile and a half, which is great for a first run."

"Then you must have run ten miles," said Ron worshipfully.

They got back into his car. Ron did not want to stop in and see his mother. He wasn't ready to explain Zoe to anyone. It wasn't going to last. He wasn't going to be able to keep up with her. He didn't want to answer any questions after she left him. He thought about Robin for just an instant and then he shoved the image away from his brain with a screaming "No!" that he kept deep inside of him.

They drove up Bloomfield Avenue towards Welmont Lanes. Ron was showing her the neighborhoods. They passed the new high rise apartment building that skirted the border of Glen Ridge, into one of the black sections of the city where second hand stores and soul food eateries and the Jehovah's witnesses all had storefronts. The apartments were dilapidated, the side streets were worse. Zoe felt a look of appall spread across her face and tighten her mouth and darken her eyes. Ron talked about walking these streets like it was a badge of honor. She just felt endangered. As they approached the center of Montclair from the south, it all changed with a four-cornered plaza of banks and fine shops that were designed for upscale patrons. The shift was abrupt and obvious. She felt herself settle back against the headrest with a certain amount of reinstated ease. Ron was talking about movie theaters and music shops and she was looking at the people who seemed so much more like her. How could they live so close to such an obvious lack of safety?

The neighborhood was slowly shifting again when he turned onto the street next to Welmont. Some things were clean but others were run down. The mixture gave her a tolerable sense of danger that she found more exciting than threatening. Quimpy maneuvered his Caddy with the glow of a man who had just had a good night and was expecting things to continue in the same vein. He'd tacked his 3 game score sheet up on the refrigerator. He was interested in a match but he wasn't hungry for one. It was a good place to be. He felt that he could sit back and let things come to him and sort them through and take the best bet without needing to prove anything else this weekend. He could have even skipped today, but he wanted to bask in last night. A perfect game was one thing, but a 700 series was an accomplishment that was not so much based on luck as it was a credit to sustained excellence.

Ron reached down and squeezed Zoe's bottom as they walked through the dark, cool, enclosed parking lot. She instantly turned to him and pressed her glowing body against his and whispered. "You can take me out of here whenever you want and just bring me someplace and do whatever you want to me. You don't even have to say anything. Just snap your fingers or give me a look, and I'll be right in back of you."

Ron smiled, felt his chest puff and said. "Let's get something to eat here. I have to see this guy that called last night. Then we are out of here." She reached her hand out and squeezed his ass and repeated, "You can do whatever you want to do to me."

When they walked in the back door the usual collection of heads turned. There was a crowd on 15 and 16, a match was going on. Ron smiled remembering when it would have been the most important thing happening in the day, but now he walked passed not even bothering to see who was bowling. His arm was around Zoe's waist as they walked to the luncheonette.

Butchie nudged TJ after they walked by. "Ronnie's finally got a hole that he can crawl into. It's a skinny hole, but any hole is better than none."

TJ puffed on his cigar and laughed but did not answer.

Sal was watching too and turned to the deskman. "Well at least she's white. I half expected that jerk-off to walk in with some nigger broad one day." The deskman laughed. "He might yet. Didn't Quimpy bring some dark meat in here one day?"

"Who knows if Quimpy humps anything but his bowling ball." said Sal.

Quimpy was having coffee with Buster at the counter. He turned to smile when he saw Ron and Zoe. "Well, glad to see you finally got around to coming back." he said, ignoring Zoe.

Ron laughed and held up Zoe's hand wrapped in his own. "This is Quimpy, Zoe. He's one of my oldest friends."

Quimpy nodded and looked up at Zoe smiling and said, "You know he's a crazy fucked up lunatic right?"

Zoe laughed and blushed but did not answer. They three of them slid into a booth and Buster went up to see what was happening on 15 and 16. They ordered cheeseburgers and coffee. He hadn't let go of Zoe's hand and she was holding on to him as if some strong wind might blow through the luncheonette any minute and carry her who knows where. Quimpy said, "708." And then allowed the number to settle in.

"Last night?" said Ron

Quimpy nodded smiling and then Ron smiled and turned to Zoe. "708 is a huge number."

Zoe let go of Ron's hand and interlaced her fingers on the countertop between them. "It's nice to meet you Quimpy. "

Quimpy bobbed his head without saying anything at first and then smiled. "I can see why Ron wouldn't want to be wasting his time around here."

Ron slid his hand below the counter and grasped her thigh, fingers close to the top of it, squeezing her leg, feeling the muscles and the heat that was radiating from between her legs. "So what's this about a job?" he said to Quimpy.

Quimpy answered, "Eighteen an hour, takes a couple weeks to see cash, but the job is nothing. You pick up some books and go and sit with these kids for a couple of hours. You talk to them. Teach them if you want. Then you leave and turn in your time sheet. Kids give you any shit, you just walk out. They need you. It's an easy bit."

"What do I have to do?"

"Show up at my office sometime through the week and I'll show you. You gonna stick around here?"

"Not at all," said Ron. "You heard from Hank?"

"Somebody told me that he got a job as an assistant golf pro. He ain't around anymore."

Ron took two fast bites of his burger, saw that Zoe had already demolished hers and said, "Me neither"

"That's cool," said Quimpy. "This place was never anything good for you."

"It ain't good for nobody," said Ron, sliding into the vernacular.

Zoe asked where the bathroom was and both he and Quimpy watched her walk away. "That's a very pretty tail that she's got."

"No shit," said Ron and finished his burger in large bites.

When they got back into the car, he thought he smelled a faint staleness on her breath and noticed that's he did not kiss him as they drove back to his apartment.

He thought about Welmont. It must have been at least four years since he'd been there last, and they acted as if he'd been there every Saturday. He wondered if that was their way of ignoring him or if they hadn't really missed him. The place just didn't change. It was frozen in time like a village in a glass bowl that you could shake and cause snow to fall. He wondered if Quimpy changed or if he was just the same as everyone else at Welmont. He wasn't. He'd called Ron and asked if he could help him up with some extra money. Nobody at Welmont would ever do such a thing. The only money they would let go of was a lure that was supposed to suck a fish into deeper water. Ron wondered if Quimpy's job offer was a lure and into what deep water Quimpy might be trying to suck him. He looked over at Zoe; she was staring out the window with her hand up over her mouth.

"What did you think of Welmont?" he asked.

"It was an ugly place," she said without taking her hand away. "They are ugly people."

"Do you think I'm like them?"

"I think that they are jealous that you aren't like them and would like nothing better to make everyone and everything just as ugly as they are."

A Bob Dylan line surged through Ron's brain. "... drag you down into the hole that he's in." It repeated like it was on an unending loop as he parked the car and they walked towards his apartment.

She took his hand and held it as they walked. "You're nothing like them. You are a beautiful man." He stretched over to kiss her but she danced away and said, "Wait until we are inside."

Chapter 8

Back at Ron's apartment she took her clothes off and then took his clothes off smiling and squirming as he caressed her. Then she ran the first bath that Ron had ever seen in his tub and filled it with bathing salts that smelled of vanilla. She knelt on a towel that was folded on the tile floor next to the tub in which he lay

back and closed his eyes. Her egg-shell blue eyes followed the progress of her hands as she stroked his shoulders and his ribs and his thighs that she knew would become hard, unyielding and forceful. She wanted them that way. She dabbed exploding bubbles onto his nipples and admired the taunt hard kernel that stood out for her. She slid her strong forearm muscles in ascending and descending waves of soapy pleasure along the length of him. Her nipples were hard and her clit was swollen as she worked her thumbs higher and higher on his thighs and then saw his cock swell so that the head poked through the top of the water.

His eyes were deep green when he opened them and stared at her from a dreamy haze. They startled her as she worked over his wet body. He sat up and turned the hot water on full blast. He stood up and lifted her with a cooperative ease, his body dripping. He lowered her into brim filled, warm, sudsy tub. Starting with her toes he silently rubbed the bubbles from the sponge into her flesh with the help of his trailing hand. One hand was holding the loaded sponge and slowly squeezing it. The other was rubbing slow, soft, smooth circles into her thighs, into her breasts, along her belly. When she thrust her pelvis up he emptied the sponge onto her sex and then massaged it with those concentric maddening circles and she moaned, fitfully.

Ron carried her dripping body to the bed and stretched her legs up over her head and entered her with the thrust of a suitor. She bucked for him; pelvis unable to stop and he pounded into her and then shot seed inside of her and she hoped that he had impregnated her, and wrapped her arms around him holding him until she was asleep.

In late September, the coolness of the evening comes late to Elizabeth. Ron was reading papers when she opened her eyes. His body was long and relaxed but his eyes were intent on the words. When he saw that she was awake, he turned the stack of papers over and said, "I loved watching you sleep."

She said, "Can we go for a ride?"

He said, "We'll have to get dressed"

She frowned. He said, "I have to get dressed but I can wrap you in something." She brought a pad and they drove into the hills, curled in a plaid comforter, sketching with a pencil, as the fading light softened the full rich greens into shades of dark. Ron wondered what his students were doing right now; the voices of the essays were whispering in his mind. Zoe repressed her feelings of hunger with the need not to vomit again.

Chapter 9

On Sunday morning, Ron told Zoe that he was going to need to spend most of the day with papers. She smiled and stretched in front of him. His eyes grew perceptibly larger as she spread her legs and said, "Are you going to want to visit me later?"

Ron cleared his throat but he couldn't take his eyes away from in between her legs. "I assigned all these essays," he said unconvincingly.

She laughed and snapped her legs shut so quickly that it made him blink. "Maybe I'll spend the day at my parents' house and go for a swim and show my face. Do you want to drive me there now?" The angular shape of her jaw had a strong curve and with the way the sunlight was dancing off of her hair he could have sworn that she was throwing off a radiation of light that came from within her.

"Do you think that maybe we should talk about living together?"

She smiled broadly and slid her arms around his neck and said, "We just did."

He drove her home feeling very close to her and not wanting to send her off anywhere, almost as if some spell would be broken if she wasn't in contact with him. She talked to him about her sisters and how they used to put on puppet shows for their parents on Sundays. The girls had constructed a miniature stage and Zoe painted the comedy and tragedy Greek theater masks on it. They would practice all week long. Hiedi would write the script and Barbara, the only one of the daughters named for someone on their father's side of the family, would make clothes for the dolls that they had converted to hand puppets. Zoe would paint scenery. Her face became very dreamy when she said, "Do you think it's possible to have a childhood that is too happy? So happy that growing up can't help but be a letdown?"

"You're asking the wrong guy that question," said Ron in a voice that at that moment felt very old and far away from childhood. Except that childhood was sitting right next to him in its entire splendor. That thought made him smile.

Back at home, he unpacked his briefcase and spread the papers onto the bed. The scent of her in the sheets made him lie on his back and just close his eyes, turn his face into the bed sheets and inhale her. He felt a stirring between his legs and his eyes opened like some kind of alarm sounded in his head. He needed to work.

Coffee and papers and a red pen carried him through the next hours. He learned that they had uniform difficulty with the placement of nouns and verbs. He drew circles and wrote to each of them. By the time he was finished with a paper, there was as much red on it as there was any other color ink. When he could link a face with a paper, it made him smile. To each of them, he wrote a few sentences at the

end. He told them what he thought were their best ideas and what they needed to work on to express themselves better. Lashly had very rarely paid him any compliments at all and he wasn't going to be one of those teachers who made it an ordeal for students to read their graded work.

He was insatiable for their ideas. He almost sighed when he finished reading some of the papers. He wanted to talk to the authors right then and show them what could make their papers better. They were so vulnerable and transparent. He was almost finished with his senior essays when he read he came to Andrea's paper.

In the second paragraph, she wrote about the power of language. She had learned the year before that poetry could inspire emotional and physical responses with the power of words. Then she wrote, "I once read a poem that said the words 'a candle between my thighs' and when I read it I felt jolted. Then I read it again and again and it made me want to have that feeling." Ron read to the end of the paper and then started reading it again. He noticed that he was sweating and that he hadn't turned on the widow fan even though it was a warm day. He got up and to his shock saw that he had an erection. He walked to the fan and switched it on. Then he lit a cigarette and read her paper again. The words "a candle between her thighs" jumped out at him again and he stared at them. She said that it came from Dylan Thomas. What was he supposed to say about this? Was he supposed to ignore it? It was the most powerful line that he'd read all day but how was he supposed to respond to a seventeen year old girl who was writing about a candle sliding between her legs? She deserved a response. That was exactly what poetry was supposed to do: stop you dead in your tracks and make you want to go back, but how was he supposed to tell her that. He was sure that he'd never heard the line before. He would have remembered it if he had. He wanted to know where it came from. Then he saw again that she said it was Dylan Thomas. What was this girl doing reading Dylan Thomas? He went to his bookshelf and looked for his complete Dylan Thomas poems. He had to admit that he hadn't read them ardently. He loved the prose things like "A Child's Christmas in Wales" and of course "Do Not Go Gentle" but he didn't know this piece and now he was determined to find it. The phone rang and it was Zoe. "I want to be there with you," she said.

"Can I come and get you?" he answered.

"Come now," she whispered.

He left the book of poems lying on the bed but carefully packed away each of the stacks of papers. He glanced over at his clock. It was 6 o'clock. He'd been reading for more than 5 hours and he hadn't once looked up at the time. He hadn't

straightened up the apartment. Before he left, he pulled the sheet up and tried to smooth it out and put the pillows at the head of the bed next to the rougher fabric of the sofa portion of the hide-a-bed. He left the book in the middle of the bed and was out the door.

She had run to the curb almost before the car stopped. She dove in and ran her arms over his shoulders and kissed him and straddled him so that she was between him and the steering wheel. Then she said, "I guess you can't drive this way can you?"

She settled onto her side of the car, rolled down the window, the first rays of the sunset were bouncing on the sides of her glasses and her presence warmed him. She waved at the closing drape as he pulled away.

When they were back inside his apartment, she said, "I did something for you today. I hope that you like it."

Ron looked at her quizzically. "What did you do?"

She pulled her shorts down and unbuttoned her top. He lay back on his bed and she tucked her hand into the waistband of her panties and slowly wriggled them down until they were just over her knees.

Ron's eyes were drawn and then they saw the bareness, the nakedness of her pubic triangle. "I waxed myself for you." She stood very straight until the panties gathered below her knees and then slid down to her calves. Then she stepped out of them. Ron was transfixed. He knew that his mouth was open but he didn't care.

"I want to kiss it," he murmured.

She crawled onto his bed and lay on her side and then her left toe raised and pointing at the ceiling, she let it slide down to the back of her right knee so that he could see her the way the flower of her opened and swelled with the feel of his gaze.

She tasted moist and fresh like a saturated breeze and he let the tip of his tongue wiggle along the slit of her sex; appreciating her with soft licks. She slid from her knees to the mattress and raised herself up for his mouth. She held herself up like a delectable morsel and quivered for him. He shifted his shoulders between her thighs, inclined his head and placed his lips on her. She tightened her cheeks and thrust up at him. He bit into her naked lips and shook his head like a warm, feral lover and she felt the waves of the first orgasm pulse through her. It caused her to buck against his hard teeth. He swallowed. He sucked and shook his head, gulping her. His lips pushed against her hips, his hard teeth squeezing her like a fruit that he wanted to split open. Then he rubbed the wet of her all over his face; he

glistened with her. He pressed the chin that he hadn't shaved since the day before against her lips, while his fingers peeled back the hood of puffed flesh that gathered in protection of the small bundle of nerves that was throbbing and pulsing and sending electric shocks like Morse code.

His sandpaper chin was pressing to her lips, his fingers were exposing a swollen clit, his tongue was lapping at it like a soft gentle whip; she exploded again. Juice was squirting out of her. She tossed her head as the erotic explosions rolled over her.

His eyes traced the tender shape of her flowered lips, blinking so that his long lashes brushed her into deeper frenzy. She locked her elbows in back of her knees and rocked for him, incoherent moans formed in her brain. She was not at all sure that they came out of her mouth that was locked wide open and gasping, head in jerking spasm that moved it from side to side. He had never seen a depilated vagina before.

Robin had been covered in a soft angel hair, a tangled swirl and she had told him it felt funny when he sucked on her and drove his curled tongue wiggling in and out of her, just as he was doing now with Zoe. She screamed with this orgasm or maybe it was a continuation of the last one that hadn't stopped, but the urge to mount her was overwhelming.

He was so hard and he wanted to feel the silky warmth of that tight wet glove that she slid around him. He needed to feel her fingers on his ass urging him in and out. Wait! She didn't do that, Robin did that! A voice inside of him screamed, "No!" and he sat him with a dazed expression.

She panted and tried to relax and managed to say, "I was about to pass out."

He sank deep inside of himself, clawing and screaming against the silence like a man that had been tossed down a well, fingertips ripping against the stony sides of the chasm. He blinked up at her; had he been blind? What had he been seeing? Where had he been? Then his thoughts merged into clarity. It was Robin's hand that slapped on his bucking ass, her small voice in his ear saying "I love you," repeating it over and over.

He looked Zoe straight in her face and realized that what he wanted was that Robin would be this way with him. He told himself it wasn't true. Zoe was in tune with his spirit; he loved the way that she saw him. For Robin, he had been all potential and doubt and now it was himself that he doubted.

How could he let a woman inside of him again? What was wrong with him? Look at what had happened the last time that he'd made that mistake! And then

Zoe had his head in her arms and she was holding him to her breasts and he realized that he had been crying.

Chapter 10

Monday morning: Mr. Tuck stood in front of his 9th grade reading class grateful for the faces and the immediacy of their needs. They were reading “An Open Window” and it was painful for all of them.

Ron said “Close your books.” And then he told them the story of the nervous guest and the imaginative girl who played with his fears and her longings. They listened quietly and understood. Then he said, “Now, I’m going to read it for you.” And then he did and they understood. Then he said, “Let’s go line by line and when we find words you don’t know, raise your hand and I’ll put them on the board and we can see what this is about together.” They did.

It was a two page story but he filled the three panels of the chalkboard once and then he filled them again. He had no time for a dictionary and so he told them what the words meant as he understood them.

He paced down the aisles as they copied everything that he had written. His handwriting frustrated them and so he printed, which only added to the frustration because his printing would lapse into a combination of block and cursive writing and sometimes m’s had three humps and sometimes they just had two. He said that that night they should take the story home and tell it to their families. Tomorrow he wanted to talk about what everyone had said.

“Suppose nobody’s home?” said Connie DeMatteo

Ron thought for a moment and then said, “Tell the story to yourself like you are somebody else. Imagine that you are somebody listening. That’s what I used to do. My mom was never home and so I’d turn the TV on to a news station and turn the sound down and talk to the face like it was someone I knew.” They all giggled. He could be very silly.

After lunch, he met with his senior class. Returning their essays, he thought about what Andrea had written and his response to it. “Poetry can cause an emotional reaction, a deep thought or even a physical response. The power is not in the language alone but in the connection that the reader makes to the language. All by itself, the poem is powerless. It needs you, even more than you need it.” Was it a copout considering the nature of what she had written? He decided that it wasn’t. It was what he could in good conscience communicate to one of his students in a high school.

The class was surprised that he had their essays ready. Rosa said, "Didn't you go out at all this weekend, Mr. Tuck?"

Ron grinned at them showing them his white teeth and his dimples. "Why would I go out when I could stay at home and read your papers?" he said. They laughed.

"It's ok," said Rosa. "Most of us don't have a life either."

"Rosa has a life," chirped Tina. Then she muttered under her breath, "She spends it on her back." Two or three of the girls closest to Tina began to laugh and Rosa shot the group a hard look that dissolved into a deep smile.

"I know, I know," said Rosa, "but I just can't help it."

"How is Beowulf a story about people who are partying too hard?" asked Ron.

"These men don't do anything but brag about themselves," said Tina.

"Why do you think that?" asked Ron.

Tina was thoughtful then she said, "Look at the way that they go on and on about themselves. They have more titles for each other than there are grains of rice in a Carolina box. It's all exaggeration. They just exaggerate everything."

"Why would they do that," said Ron.

The class was silent. He waited. He liked it when they were quiet like this. It meant that they were thinking. He scanned their faces trying to read their thoughts. Ron's mind was running full speed. They had been right of course, but Lashly had taught him that it was easy to put characters down and that it was important to learn to defend literature. How could he teach them that? How had Lashly taught it to him? Ron thought, by doing it. He taught me that it should be important by how important he made it to himself. That wouldn't work on these kids. There were too many other things competing for importance in their lives. But Rosa had said that some of them didn't have lives either. Ron smiled to himself about the "either" as he paced around the room rolling chalk between his palms, listening to the way that it clicked on his ring. He looked down at the Minnesota Jasper that Robin had given him the day that he'd arrived in Minneapolis. "This is for getting your ass out of New Jersey," she said to him.

Then an idea hit him. "When I was growing up around here reputation was really important. For girls, it meant that you couldn't have dated too many guys and for guys it meant it mostly had to do with how tough you were."

Rosa whispered to Andrea, "Or how big a dick he has." Andrea laughed.

Ron ignored them. "Why would a guy want a big reputation?" said Ron. Rosa and Andrea burst out laughing. This time Ron turned to them. He walked straight

towards Andrea not realizing that at their seated height they were right at cock level. The girls laughed harder. "Come on," said Ron, "stay with me here. Why is it important to have a reputation for being a tough guy?"

"So that people won't try to step on you," said the girl looking up at his face and seeing his green eyes very intently looking first at her and then at Rosa and then at the rest of the class.

"Why would it be any different for them?"

"Because they were like from biblical times. Everything was different," said Barbara, a chubby girl who shifted from side to side in her seat as she spoke.

"Maybe some things don't change," said Ron. "Maybe that's why it is important to read this stuff to see that some things don't change."

Rosa said, "Does that mean that after we learn that some things don't change that we can stop reading this corny stuff and read something that is interesting?"

The class laughed. Ron laughed too. Rosa was right. It was kind of boring but he didn't think that their studying it had to be boring, not if he could make them see the connection between them and it. "All these people thinking about a lot of the same things that you and I are thinking about. Maybe they've thought of some things that we haven't. Maybe some of them were smarter than us and we can learn from them." Ron hesitated. It wouldn't do any good to scold them, not yet. He hadn't hooked them deeply enough yet. He needed to lure them in just a little more first. "When does the monster appear?"

"At night," said Tina quickly.

"What have they been doing before the monster comes into the mead hall?"

"Sleeping," said Andrea.

"And before that?"

There was the silence again Ron sent them back to the book, to the story. They read together about the first time that Grendel had appeared. Then he sent them to another section and another.

"They've always been drinking," said Ron finally. "What do men do after they've been drinking?"

The girls laughed. Rosa said, "They pee." The girls laughed again.

Laughing with them, Ron said, "What else do they do?"

"They get all hot," said Rosa loudly. The girls laughed very hard now.

Ron said, "And what do they do after they get hot?" Then he blushed realizing that they would take it differently from the way that he meant it.

Rosa said in a mildly mocking voice, "Mr. Tuck, you don't want us to talk about that."

“Do they ever fight?” said Ron. The room got very, very quiet. “Could people sometimes get hurt?” The room was so quiet now that he could hear his own footsteps as he paced back and forth in front of the room. “Maybe this is a story about the monsters that come out from inside of men after they’ve been drinking too much. These were violent men. Men who were used to killing and fighting. Is it any wonder that if you put a bunch of them together in a bar, that someone would get hurt?” And then almost as perfect punctuation to what he said, the bell rang. He smiled. His timing was getting better.

Ron got into his car and drove back towards his house. His mind was still back with his classes. He could see their open faces and their deep, dark eyes like they were indelibly printed somewhere inside of him. He asked himself for at least the tenth time if what he was trying to do was any good for them. Did he have anything that he could really give them that was any different or better than what the other teachers had to offer? They looked at him with faith in their eyes. They trusted him, or at least it seemed to him that they trusted him. Suppose he fucked it up? Suppose some Catholic thing just made him go off and somehow they were taken away from them. He would be just another in what he knew to be a long list of disappointments for them. He couldn’t let that happen. If he had to pretend to still be a Catholic, he would. Then another voice said inside of him said, “They’re just kids. Who are you, the fucking Catcher in the Rye?” He screamed back at the voice that he was sane. That he would battle for his sanity. That he would not let himself go crazy again. It was giving up. He didn’t want to give up on them and he didn’t want them to know how quickly, how completely, he wanted to be part of their lives. He wanted to be a teacher that they would smile about when they were older and to do that he had to give up some things and be there for them now. Nothing that he had ever done was as important as what he was doing right now, and he would not allow himself to let them down.

Back at his apartment, he found a note from Zoe that said that she had taken the train back to her father’s house. Ron noticed that she never called it her parents’ house. It was always her father’s house. He missed not having her there and yet he didn’t want to miss her. He had learned to be alone again. Robin had taken that away from him and he had it back now. He could be alone without waiting for someone to call up and save him. It had been so hard without the aid of being a kid who could have imaginary friends and games. What he had now was music and pot. He rolled a joint and turned on the radio. He lit the joint and sat next to the fan so that the smoke would be sucked out into the alleyway. He sat back in his Danish rocking chair, one of the two chairs that he had taken from his

Aunt Dottie's house after she died. He looked over at the place of honor that he gave her fan back chair. He didn't sit in it as much as he stared at it and imagined her when he did. She wouldn't like these kids. She would think that he was wasting his time and that they didn't pay him enough money.

The phone rang twice before he moved towards it. He expected to hear Zoe's voice but it wasn't Zoe. Robin said, "I was thinking about you and wondering how you were."

In a stunned voice, he said "I'm teaching in a little Catholic school in Newark."

Robin laughed. "Are you pretending to be Warren?"

"I think that I can do this, Robin. These kids grew up on the same streets that I grew up on. I can help them to learn what they need to learn to get out."

"So, you want to save them?"

"I don't know. I wish that you could see what happens to me when I'm in class. It's very strange and kind of wonderful really."

"Are you smoking pot again?"

"Not so much," said Ron, stubbing the joint out in his ashtray.

"I'm coming back for a visit."

"When?"

"In three weeks."

"How long will you be staying?"

"I haven't decided. Can I count on you to pick me up?"

"You can always count on me. Didn't I tell you that?"

"Things change."

"Yeah, they do," he said. She was fully alive in his mind now and he could see her face so very clearly, the high cheekbones, the blonde straight hair, and the blue eyes that saw everything.

"Are you seeing anyone?"

"No," he lied.

"You should see other people, Ron."

"I want to see you."

There was what seemed like an incredibly long silence over the phone line.

"I'll call you again when I know when I'm getting in."

"OK," said Ron. And then she was gone and he was alone in his one room apartment in Elizabeth and the radio was annoying him and he felt very lonely. He picked up his book bag and began to prepare for the next day's classes. He relit the joint and in a while it felt as if he must have imagined that she had called.

It was dark when the phone rang again. This time it was Zoe and her voice sent a wash of guilt that felt like a cold shower run through his mind and then down over his body.

She said, "I've been waiting for you to call."

He said, "I had to work."

"Is it too late to come and get me?"

Ron broke into a grin and said, "I'm half out the door already."

Chapter 11

The next day Ron was invited to the principal's office. Sister Irene was in back of her desk. There was a large arrangement of cut flowers underneath the picture of the Blessed Virgin. Off to the left and directly over her desk was a crucifix. "Things seem to be going rather well for you, Mr. Tuck, but we have to talk about some things."

"Yes Sister."

"First of all the girls are very excited to have you here and I've already had two calls from parents asking about who you were."

Ron stiffened. He wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. "It must be a tad difficult for a man like you being here with us, Mr. Tuck. These girls are very young and sometimes very obvious in their interests."

"I like them very much, Sister and it's not at all difficult. I know my place."

The nun smiled. That was exactly what she was worried about and she liked that he was bright enough to anticipate what could have been a tense conversation.

"I came from around here, Sister, and these kids deserve someone who is willing to see them as what they are."

"And what is it that you see them as, Mr. Tuck?"

"Young girls who could benefit from learning the language, Sister."

The nun smiled and came around from behind her desk. "We'd like to have you over for dinner next Wednesday. Do you think that you can make it?"

"I'd like that very much, Sister."

"Good, then we'll expect at six o'clock. We'll be back from prayers by then. Enjoy your day, Mr. Tuck."

And Ron did enjoy the day. The pattern of his classes was a constant in his life now. Whenever he had nothing to do, he had preparation for the next class and

papers to grade and pieces to read again with an eye towards what he would say to them the next day or the day after that. Twice a day, he dutifully went to the coffee shop and got his coffee. He didn't sit on the fire escape and drink it and smoke the way that he had done on the first day or two. Now, he took it back to his car and sat there with a stack of papers, the front seat rolled back, his watch placed on the dashboard so that he didn't lose track of time. Each story or each fragment of a larger piece of literature that he read was seen with a new eye, in a new light. He wasn't seeing them for himself as much anymore as he was studying them for his students. He found that his thoughts went deeper into the ideas. He saw not only what the ideas were but what the ideas were meant to do. It was an entirely new way of looking at what he read that he'd never experienced before. What would his classes think of this? How could he structure something to attach it to an earlier idea? When should he say this? He didn't take notes, he absorbed what he read. He felt himself wrapping around it and internalizing it. It grew inside of him and became part of how he looked at everything. The stranger thing was that it didn't only happen with literature, it happened with everything he saw and everyone he saw.

When he wasn't teaching or preparing he was with Zoe and that was magical. He never told her that he'd heard from Robin. In fact, he told himself that he had not heard from Robin and made the lie stick, although it didn't stick too deeply. He was unable to do that. If he saw the truth of something a certain way, he didn't seem to have the ability to consciously lie to himself. He couldn't lie to himself. It had always been a problem and he knew that he'd gotten it from his mother. She had been told so many lies as a child that she had taught him and re-taught him the value of truth. She seemed far away now. Although she was always just a telephone call away, or a short drive away. If he needed her, or more possibly if she needed him, he could be there.

He'd gone to see Quimpy's office and had been duly impressed by its size and the wonderment that Quimpy actually had a secretary. It would take about two weeks to process his forms and put his name in front of the board of education. Ron didn't understand any of that but Quimpy had said that it was all bullshit and not to worry about it. They had agreed to get together for the games that Sunday. Zoe was going to visit her youngest sister up in Boston and Ron was alone on Friday afternoon. His phone rang.

"Hello, Ron," said Chris.

"Chris, how are you doing?"

"I'm getting blasted with the law round the clock. It's like the Sheriff's revenge." Ron laughed hard and genuine. "Anyway, what I was thinking was that if you weren't doing anything tonight that you could drive in and we could get some dinner and maybe play guitars."

"I'd love to do that," said Ron quickly. "I'm on my way in."

"See ya then," said Chris.

The drive into the lower east side on a Friday afternoon was a nightmare. Ron fought his way down to the parkway and then up to Route 82. That would take him to the tunnel. The skyway was a stinking crawl. It was a warm afternoon and the industrial combination of smells rose like an uncomfortable tweed suit that assaulted his nostrils and would not let them go. The cars rolled and then stopped for no apparent reason. They sat idling and then would roll forward less distance than he hoped that they would. Ron had brought some joints with him but he refused to light one. Everyone that he knew that smoked in their cars got busted. He'd seen it after Hank, who had been so careful about the way that they smoked in the car and where they smoked in the car, got popped. Even Chris had been popped. Joseph had been popped. Ron was not about to get busted. He had learned a long time ago when and how to pull back so that didn't happen. It was only with Chris that he stretched those limits.

The tunnel squirted him onto the streets like he was ejaculate. He moved around a circle in a tight speeding line of other cars that moved around the circle, and then he saw the street and turned and he was on Broome Street and he careened his way across town, wincing at every pot hole and uneven street over which he rolled and bounced.

East 6th, between Avenues A and B, was humming. Windows were up and some people were cooking their dinner on the fire escapes so as not to heat up the small kitchens. Ron parked, grabbed his guitar from the trunk and walked down the street feeling very cool but scared at the idea that someone might actually think that he could play and ask him to play. He remembered the looks on faces when he played his guitar for them, how people would just start to talk to each other by the third verse of some of his songs. The idea made him wince and grip the guitar case handle tighter.

Ron was never sure how many flights he had to walk up to get to Chris's apartment. He only knew that it was the landing after the strong smell of gas that always gave him the feeling that the building was unsafe. He could hear Chris's stereo as he turned the corner for the last half flight. The door was slightly ajar but Ron knocked anyway. "Hello?"

Chris called out. "Come on in."

He was on his knees in a small living room that had large windows that faced the south. There were rugs, a thick oriental rug on the floor and wall hangings and pictures that reminded him of Rahway. Chris put down the guitar that he had been playing along with to the stereo and reached in back of him for a large pasta bowl that was filled with pot, along with various seeds and stems. He had a playing card and was sifting through the shake and ridding it of seeds and twigs.

Ron reached into his pocket and dropped his contribution of three joints into the bowl. He put his guitar case down and sat cross legged across from Chris, who looked somehow thinner than Ron had remembered him and focused in a different way that Ron had seen him before. On the other side of a large pillow that was on the window side of Chris there was a stack of law books and notebooks.

Ron said, "How's school?"

"It's almost over now, but then it's the fucking bar exam." Chris shook his head with amazement at the thought. The fucking bar exam where it mattered how many people took it at one sitting as much as it mattered what they wrote.

Chris handed Ron the bowl and lifted up from his knees in a fluid unfolding. "Listen to this." He went to the stereo that was mounted halfway up one of the floor to ceiling book shelves that were filled with books and records and piles of papers. Ron lit one of the pre-rolled joints that he'd wanted so much when he was stuck in traffic. Chris was careful with the needle and got it down into the perfect hissing silence between the tracks.

"One soft infested summer me and Terry became friends, trying in vain to breathe the fire we was born in"

It was Springsteen and his voiced hissed and wailed and glistened with hope, disappointment, strength, the past and the present all at once. They smoked the joint. And then they smoked another. Chris turned off the stereo and picked up his guitar and began to play it softly. He was playing blues and the single notes slid out of the sound hole and teased Ron's imagination.

"Do you ever think about Rahway, Chris?"

Chris looked down at the guitar, not making eye contact with Ron. There was a pause and then Chris said, "Have you ever been to Zabars?"

Out on the street Ron and Chris set a good pace as they moved east up 6th street and then they turned south and went into a delicatessen. Ron realized that he'd been hungry. Chris just wanted to buy cake or donuts, but they each ordered a sandwich and walked back to the apartment. They opened things up on the floor of the living room and Chris said, "I try not to think about it because it just makes

me feel bad and I want to have something other than feeling bad connected with my memories of the place. It's just Sheriff's place now and it will never be anything else than that while he's there."

Ron took his guitar out and they began to play and the night got a bit cooler and the sounds from the street turned into night time sounds. There was a siren and there was a radio and there were the sounds of people speaking different languages and hollering their greetings. Ron thought about how much it reminded him of Newark, not that New York City was like Newark but that this part of it was. In the middle of one of their songs a mouse dropped down from the chimney and ran frantically surprised along the wall and into Chris's kitchen. Chris laughed. Ron had jumped when he'd seen the rodent but Chris went looking for it with a cardboard box and was talking softly as if he could lure it out and make it come to him and then Ron heard the box slam down and Chris exclaimed, "Ah, now I got you."

Then he carried the box down the four flights of stairs and let the mouse out. When he came back he said, "I suppose that isn't the smartest approach but I didn't feel like killing it." They settled back into their play with the guitars and in just under an hour another mouse or perhaps the same mouse dropped down the chimney and Chris laughed very hard and said, "That's what I get for not killing it when I could."

Ron tried to tell Chris about Zoe and about his students. And Chris tried to listen, Ron noticed that he didn't have any questions and that it seemed as if he was just waiting for Ron to finish what he was saying. Finally Ron asked, "Are you seeing anybody?"

"Just law books and mice," said Chris.

It was very late when he drove home and it was a clear sail over the same streets that had been so congested when he'd come in. Chris's apartment seemed larger and somewhat more private than his one room studio. He did have a real bathroom and Chris's apartment only had this alcove with a box and pull chain. Chris had a stall shower in the middle of the kitchen, but at least there was no limit on sound and Ron was sure that there was no landlady keeping tabs on what Chris was doing or not doing. It was always that way when you wanted real privacy. You had to sacrifice a certain amount of comfort in order to get it.

Chapter 12

Ron fell asleep quickly. He remembered thinking that he wished that Zoe was there to sleep alongside of him and then he didn't remember anything at all. From somewhere inside of a dream he felt heat, very hot on his face, on his hair and it pulled him awake. He lifted his head and stared into a very real wall of fire that was crackling and dancing with devouring merriment.

Jumping up quickly he stared at it, was transfixed by it. The flames were climbing up the side of his wall. A calm came over him as he pulled himself into his jeans and made sure that his pot tray was tucked away in the drawer under the writing table that doubled as his eating table. Then he opened the door and ran down the hallway to the fire extinguisher. Turning it upside down as he knew you were supposed to do, he took hold of the hose and nozzle. When he got back to the apartment the entire back of the hide-a-bed was engulfed and he pointed the extinguisher at the conflagration and then nothing happened. The god damned thing was empty. He shook it and cursed and dropped it on the floor and ran into the hallway screaming "Fire!" He screamed as loud as he could scream. It was only then that he realized that he'd been choking. He tried to clear his voice and screamed again, "Fire!"

Ron heard doors begin to open and people coming into the hall and he ran back into the apartment and dragged his Aunt's Dottie's chair as far away from the flames as he could. He tried to fill something with water; anything that he could throw on the flames that were eating everything around him. He saw the paint on the dresser that he'd had since he was a little boy begin to blister and peel away. His feet were bare and now the floor seemed very hot. The water that he flung at it did nothing. It disappeared into the flame and belched out one quick thick puff of black smoke.

He could hear people around him now and someone said, "Get him out of there," and another voice screamed, "Get out into the street." Ron was dazed but he kept filling this bowl with water and flinging it at the fire. His lamp shade went up in a brightly lit crackle that surrounded it and then seemed to engulf it and then it wasn't there anymore.

Ron was dazed and staggering around what was once his apartment and then hands were on his shoulders and he was being moved and large men in hats and rubber coats were moving passed him and there was a burst of white powder everywhere in the apartment and he was being carried out into the hall and down the steps into the street. He stood there transfixed at the sight of the truck and the

people coming out of the other buildings. More and more firemen were arriving now and they ran passed him and through the double glass and wrought iron doors and up the few steps and down the hall. Ron watched them pass like shadows. No one was talking to him, but people were staring at him.

Two firemen wearing heavy gloves and coats carried the smoking remains of his hide-a-bed out the front door and dropped it on the small lawn in front of the building. People gathered around to stare at it. Then he saw his landlady and she looked scared and even more horrified when she saw Ron. "Are you hurt?" Ron stared back at her. "I don't know what happened. I was sleeping"

"I think he's in shock," said the landlady's son.

Ron looked over at his couch and wondered if he could sleep on the floor of his apartment for the rest of the night. It seemed like only a few moments later when the firemen came out and said that people could go back inside. Maybe it had been longer than a few moments. Ron started to walk back inside with the rest of the occupants of the rather large apartment house.

Men were milling around in his studio. Ron wondered if they'd found his pot and whether he was going to be arrested. He walked up to one of the men and said in a voice that was very strangely soft and raspy and thick, "Will I be able to sleep here tonight?"

The men looked at Ron with disbelieving eyes. Ron looked past them and saw that everything that he owned in his life was covered with white powder; his records, his books, his papers, his furniture, except for Aunt Dotty's chair that he had somehow managed to drag into the bathroom. Had he dragged it in there? Had someone else realized the value of it and dragged it in there for him. Ron looked for someone to thank.

His landlady was standing in front of him now. "What did you do to cause this?" she demanded.

Ron just repeated, "I was asleep."

One of the fireman said, "It wasn't the kid's fault. Look over here."

The three of them walked towards what had been his wall and the man pointed at the black char, the flash point spidery web that spread out from the electric socket on his wall. "What did you have plugged in there?" said the landlady.

"My radio, I think, and my alarm clock," said Ron.

The radio was a melted mass of plastic on the floor and one of the firemen kicked at it. The alarm was nowhere to be found. There were two gaping holes in the wall where someone had taken an axe to it. Ron stared at the slashes and felt wounded.

It was the middle of the night in Minneapolis when Robin's phone began to ring. She answered on the third volley with a sleepy hello.

"Robin, this is your father."

"What's wrong, Daddy?" There was instant concern and anticipation in the timbre of her voice.

"Your boyfriend's had a fire."

Robin looked over confusedly at Richard, who snoring softly next to her in bed. "Who?"

"Robin, Ron was burned out of his apartment tonight. You know that he lives on my street now and that he took that apartment just a block from where you used to live on Cherry Street. I think they took him to the hospital."

Robin's voice was filled with fear. She said accusingly, "Didn't you do anything to help him?"

"I tried to talk to him Robin. His eyebrows were singed and his face was very red and I could smell burning hair on him."

"Oh God, Daddy is he OK?"

"I think that they took him to the hospital Robin. He was very dazed. I don't think that he was burned badly but he kept apologizing to everyone in the street and saying that he was sorry for disturbing their night."

"OK, Daddy thanks for calling and letting me know. I'll take care of it."

"I didn't know whether I should tell you or not. The two of you are hard to figure with each other."

"It was good that you called."

Robin put down the phone. Her hands were shaking. Leni looked back out her from her shadows in the corner and gave her a plaintiff "meow." She shook her head and picked the phone up again, wondering if she would ever look at that damn cat without thinking of him. She dialed the number from memory.

Laureen answered on the fourth ring like she was wide awake even though it was almost 4am. "Hello?"

"Laureen, its Robin."

Laureen felt herself brighten into a nervous laugh. Ron's not living here anymore, Robin. He hasn't lived here in two years."

"I know," said Robin with a patient cool in her voice. "And I know that it's very late and I'm sorry to call so late but Ron was burned out of his apartment tonight. I think that they took him to the hospital."

"Did he call you?" said Laureen with a touch of amusement in her voice.

Then Robin outflanked her as she was invariably able to do. She never dealt with Laureen from anything but a position of strength. They were too much alike. "My father lives on the street. He saw Ron and tried to talk with him. Ron didn't know who he was and he was burned. I can't call his mother, but if you or Warren could help him." Then she didn't say anything.

"Do you know which hospital they took him to?"

"No, I don't."

"I'll see what Warren wants to do."

"I'm sure that you will," said Robin.

Laureen walked back through the kitchen and through the middle room that was now equipped with a dining room table and chairs and paintings. She went to the bathroom, had a pee and straightened her hair and then she knocked on Warren's door.

Warren answered with a, "Hang on just a moment and then he got up and moved to the door. He was wearing a t-shirt and jockeys.

Laureen looked down and then up at his face. "Robin just called. It seems that Ron had a fire down in Elizabeth and that he was taken to the hospital."

"How bad was it?"

"She didn't know. Her father is one of Ron's neighbors. He called her. She wants to know if we can do anything to help."

"Alright, give me a moment."

"Warren, he can't live here. I'll leave if you move him in."

"That's not why she called," said Warren.

After the doctor looked Ron over and they took his blood pressure and gave him a breathing test and inspected his body for burns, they released him. Ron felt himself moving from somewhere deep inside of him, but all he could see was that wall of flame in front of his eyes and the way the fire danced, like something that he was in love with, something that wanted to hurt him.

Warren called Elizabeth General and tried to get some information. Yes, there had been a Ron Tuck, who had been in a fire. No they had no information about whether he had been admitted. Yes, he might still be in the emergency room, but he might not be. It was a busy night. Yes, they would see if someone could get a message to him but they could not promise anything. Warren said, "Tell him that Warren Lashly called and that he's welcome to come here if he needs to."

Ron got the message as he was walking out the door of the emergency room. He was wearing a white bracelet with his name printed on it. There was a band-aid

on his hand from where they had put the heparin lock and where they had pumped a bag of fluid into him. He got into the first of a line of 3 cabs in front of the hospital and sent the driver back to Cherry Street. The sun was just coming up when he got out and paid the driver and looked around for his car. He felt for his keys reassuringly. He thought that he remembered that it was the weekend. He wanted to take a shower. He wanted to change his clothes, but he had no clothes to change into and he had no place to take the shower.

He walked over and stood in front of his building staring at the remains of his couch and saw that his rug was in a pile next to it along with his melted radio. Someone had taken a knife to the couch and exposed the stuffing to the air. He could smell the fire. He could see the fire. He could feel it still on him.

He walked over to his car and got in and thought about driving towards Rahway. He hadn't wanted to go there. The last thing that he wanted was to be broken at Rahway again. It was too early to drive up to his mother's house and he wasn't ready for her to be angry with him for having had a fire and demanding that he come back there and live. Then a thought hit him. He didn't have his book bag. A feeling of panic swept over him. Then the next thought. Why couldn't he go back to his apartment and get the things that he needed? What was going to stop him? He got out of the car and walked up through the double doors.

The quiet of the building was thick with the smell of something stronger than a burnt dinner. It didn't smell like charred food. It smelled like catastrophe. His door wasn't locked. When Ron pushed it, the door squeaked on its swollen hinges. Ron saw that it was wavy on the inside. Things were strewn everywhere on the floor in the center of the room where his couch used to be. And there was the smothering white powder on everything. Ron's eyes searched until he saw his book bag and he smiled for the first time since he didn't know when. It was slid under the coffee table over by the window under the fan that had been pushed out of the window and was lying in the side alley. He picked the bag and shook it just once the way that he always shook it. He smiled again. He was feeling a little better. He went to his dresser. His mood swung hard in the other direction when he saw it. It was the only dresser that he had ever owned. It was part of the set that was in his room in Newark when he was a small boy and slept on one of the twin beds, his great-grandmother in the other. The beds were long gone and the chest of drawers was up in the garage in Glen Ridge, but he had loved this dresser. He found a roll of plastic trash bags under his sink and stuffed handfuls of clothes into them. He went over to his writing desk and held his breath and opened the drawer under the white powder covered material. It was there. He emptied the tray into the baggie and

stuffed it into his pants and then, without looking back he walked out dragging the plastic bag stuffed with smoky clothes in one hand and holding his schoolbag in the other.

Chapter 13

He drove south towards Rahway and then his brain began to start working again. How the fuck had Warren known to call the hospital? If he knew that Ron was in the hospital, why hadn't he gone there? He thought about the message again. He could stay there if he needed to. He swung the car into right turn and headed west towards the parkway. No, he didn't need to. He stopped for some coffee at a diner in Bloomfield and then he went to a bakery and bought some freshly baked goods. If he was going home on the crest of a wipe out, he might as well bring food.

He had a key but he felt funny about using it. It was very early and there was no way that Chipper wasn't going to start barking. But then he had an idea and put the key gently into the lock and opened the door. Chipper padded out in the hallway and began wagging his tail frantically when he saw Ron. Then he peed on the rug as was his custom. Ron smiled and whispered, "Come here, Chip." The dog ran to him and Ron carefully backed out of the door and sat with the dog on the porch drinking his container of coffee and looking up and down the quiet street. He looked at the newspaper that had been delivered. It was Saturday morning. That's right. Last night he had been in the city with Chris. He stroked Chipper's head and whispered into her ear. "It's good to see you, Chip. Boy is this news going to go over like the Hindenburg." Chip perked his ears as if he understood, but continually kept sniffing at Ron's clothes and licking his face like he was trying to make it better.

When Ron heard stirring inside, he picked up the bakery bag and opened the door calling out, "Hello?"

George Bombasco walked quickly to the door, his pants undone in the front. He saw Ron and blinked. "What happened?"

"I had a fire, but I'm OK."

"What kind of fire?"

"In my apartment. Everything is toast."

"Jesus," said George shaking his head.

Ron held up the bag of donuts. "At least I brought breakfast," he said.

"We'd better let your mother sleep until she wakes up. You know how she is."

"Is it alright if I take a shower? I want to get this smell off of me."

Then George noticed the hospital band on his wrist. "You were in the hospital?"

"They were just being careful," said Ron. "I'm fine."

"Do you need clean clothes?"

"I have some things in the car."

When Ron got into the bathroom to take a shower the sight of his face startled him. His eyebrows were almost gone and the front of his hair sported frizzled clumps. His face hadn't felt hot but it sure as hell looked red.

The water sprayed over him like he was a farmer's crop in need of nourishment. He felt the grime of the fire and his nervousness and the long, long night wash away. This wasn't that bad. He wanted to live with Zoë anyway and now there was the perfect opportunity. What was damaged could be replaced and it would be new and different and not have an inconvenient history attached to it. The fire had spared Aunt Dottie's chair, he was going to be ok.

Marjorie Bombasco came out of the closed door of her bedroom slowly. Ron watched her from the kitchen table. He was drinking the coffee that George had had made and munching on a crumb bun. George had happily devoured the apple turnover that Ron always tried to remember to get for him. Marjorie had schooled him repeatedly, "Make sure that you buy an apple turnover for George. He appreciates it."

Now, she looked at her son with a happily surprised, "Good morning, Ronald. You're here early."

Ron said, "I bought you jelly donuts."

Marjorie smiled and Ron got up and poured her a cup of coffee. The sugar was on the table and he pulled the refrigerator door open and saw the half gallon of milk in the bottles that they rinsed out and returned, right where it was supposed to be. She had just bitten into the sweet fully stuffed jelly donut when Ron said, "I had a fire last night. I got burned out of my apartment. I got taken to the hospital, but I'm fine."

A large glob of jelly plopped down onto Marjorie's paper plate as her teeth clenched. "What kind of a thing is that to say to person when they've just opened their eyes?" she asked.

"If I didn't tell you, you'd say that I was keeping things from you."

"But at least let me open my eyes."

"Are they open yet?" said Ron.

"Why are you such a bastard?" she said dropping the jelly donut down onto her plate. "You bring this nice surprise and then you ruin it by saying something like that."

"Mom, I woke up in the middle of the night and there was this wall of fire a few inches from my head. I've been up all night. Give me a break, ok?"

She looked at him more closely and saw his hair and his face. "Nunny, I'm sorry." She reached over and took the sides of his head into his hands. "I love you. I'm sorry."

Ron hadn't even flinched when she had called him the baby talk name that was kind of a pig-Latin among his aunt, his mother and him. It felt warm and good, like a crumb bun and hot coffee, sitting with his mom at the breakfast table and able to think about the world from this place of security.

He told her about all of it, except the part about the pot and almost driving to Rahway. He looked around her kitchen. She had all the plants that he'd given her. She had learned to take care of them. Traces of Aunt Dottie were interlaced among her things. "Have you told your father?"

Ron shook his head, "I haven't told anyone. I just came here."

"This is always your home, Ronald."

"I know but you and George have a life and this place is small and perfect the way that you have it set up now. You know I gotta live alone, Mom."

"I don't see why you couldn't stay here until you get on your feet."

"I don't know, said Ron. "I think I'm gonna get an apartment with Zoë."

"The skinny girl with the glasses who squints all the time?"

Ron laughed and said, "Stop it." Then he said, "I need to use the phone. I'm gonna drive down there and assess the damage in a while."

It was almost 10 o'clock now; it was a safe time to be calling Rahway. Ron dialed the number with an automatic sense of familiarity.

"Hello," whinnied Warren, with a voice that said he was awake and ready for the day.

"I got your message," said Ron. "Thanks."

"Are you ok?" asked Warren.

"Are you at home today? I'm gonna take a ride down to Elizabeth in a while and see how bad this is."

"We're here."

"Maybe I'll see you later. By the way, Warren, how did you know?"

"Robin called Laureen, very early this morning."

Ron's heart began beating faster. He repeated, "Robin called?"

"Yes," drawled Lashly. "We'd like to see you here."

"Yeah," said Ron. "I'm sure I'm like a favorite song that you can't wait to get back on the turntable."

"I'll see you when I see you," said Warren.

Ron managed to leave his mother's house without saying when he would be back. His mother always understood the need for business and she had plans for her day.

He rang the bell outside of his landlady's door. He waited for a moment and then pushed the painted gold circular button again. Her face appeared on the other side of a lace curtain with gray white hair and the lines of Ireland in their creases. She pulled her door open and smiled. The fire inspector had listed 23 violations and she was thrilled that finally the owners were going to be forced to put the building into shape. Ron's fire had been a blessing. No one had been hurt and now everyone was aware. Her son, who was usually good for not much, had even made a useful suggestion and Ron had been taken to the hospital while they had time to make things right.

The owner's voice sounded nervous on the phone. "Get the people that are needed to complete the work. Don't go overboard of course, but do what needs to be done. We don't want any problems with the fire department."

"What about the tenant?" she'd said.

"Do you think that he'll sue us?" said the owner accentuating the 'us' and making them a team against this possible threat.

"I think he just wants to get what he has left and be moving on."

"Let's not do anything to upset him," said the owner.

Ron said, "Some night, huh?"

"How are you feeling, Mr. Tuck?"

"Lucky," said Ron. "Nobody was hurt, right?"

"Everyone is fine," she said reassuringly.

"I think I'd like to come by and get my things before too much longer. There's going to be the need to fix the place up and..." his voice trailed off. "I don't think that I can stay there anymore."

"Take a couple of weeks if you need to," said the landlady. This was perfect. The apartment building fixed and this pot smoking hobo out of her life.

"I'll just come in and get things when I need them," said Ron.

Back in his car, he set sights on Rahway. Driving down the main street that became St. George's Avenue, he stopped at the congestion that was created by the

Linden Pathmark and thought about the years of scammed meals that they had eaten from there. He smiled. He wondered where April was now. It was almost as if she had disappeared from existence, but they weren't in college anymore and that meant that people began living their own lives in a more separate way, at least it meant that for some of them.

Ron made the left off of St. George's and rolled into the gravel driveway, under the carport and into one of the slots in the back yard. There was only Warren's car there. Ron never ceased to wonder how someone who had been in New Jersey for what seemed like ten years could get away with driving on North Carolina plates, but Warren did.

It didn't surprise Ron that the back door was locked. It had never been locked when he'd lived there; it had never been locked when Chris lived there. It was symbolic of who Warren and Laureen were that it was locked now. He tapped on the glass. There was no response and so he tapped again. He fought an urge to get back into his car and just drive away, but he didn't. Then he saw Laureen coming down the back steps and opening the door.

"Come in, Ron," she said with a politeness that measured the distance that had grown between them.

Ron felt strange about being invited into Rahway by Laureen of all people. He had nicknamed her The Snake and had written a song about her. Chris had tried calling her The Deputy but Snake was a better fit. Ron walked passed her and went up into the kitchen. Warren was seated in his chair in front of the window at the table where they had shared so many meals. Ron felt very awkward.

"Well," said Warren smiling, "how are you?"

"I'm just trying to figure out what to do next," said Ron standing there.

"And what do you think that you want to do next?" said Warren.

"Well obviously, I'll need a place to live."

Laureen who had slid into a chair at the table between them stiffened and Ron saw her glance over at Warren.

"Yes," said Warren, "you will need that."

"I'm going to ask Zoe to move in with me."

Laureen visibly relaxed. "Nothing like setting a fire under you to get your ass to do what it should have done a while ago," she said.

"I'm not sure how she feels about it."

"Oh she wants to," said Laureen. "In spite of anything that her sister or I have said, the girl is quite in love with you, Ron. And you haven't told her about Robin at all, have you?"

"Robin's not finished with him yet," said Warren.

"Oh Warren, just shut up when you don't know what you're talking about. Robin is more than finished with him."

Ron sat there listening to them and then Warren smiled in a slow grinning way. "You are welcome to stay here until you find a place."

"Zoe knows," said Ron. "How could she not know? You and her sister showed her every poem that I wrote about Robin."

Laureen laughed. "And we can all see what a lot of good that did."

Ron said, "It's nice to know that I can stay here, Warren. Now if the two of you could just tell me how I explain that to Chris."

It seemed to Ron that they both winced simultaneously at the mention of Chris's name. It held a power that neither one was truly able to deal with."

"I can see it now," continued Ron. "Hey Chris, how are ya? I had a fire and have no place to live so I'm gonna stay with Warren and Laureen until I get myself re-situated. Yup, he'll understand that."

"Chris knows that ultimately what I did saved his career and quite possibly his life," said Warren.

"Ya think he sees it that way huh, Warren?"

"I'm not ready to have this conversation," said Laureen. She got up and walked back into her room.

Warren looked Ron straight in the eyes and said, "Do you think that I don't care for him? Do you think that it was easy doing what I had to do?"

"I think that I need a place to stay and that I'm in a bit of trouble and that it's a good thing for me that you are willing to help out. I think that it's gonna tear Chris up and that there is no way that he's not going to see it as a betrayal. But thank you. It's a kind offer. Please understand that I have to figure out how I'm going to explain it to my friend that his one time partner and one time lover want me to live in the place that they drove him out of."

"When did you see him last?"

"Last night," said Ron. "I saw him last night." He sat in complete wonderment at how fast things had changed in his life. Then he said, "I'm going to try to get in touch with Zoe." Ron stopped. "I know that I sound ungrateful and I don't mean it to come out that way, Warren. Truly, thank you for the offer."

Warren smiled. "It's my delight."

Chapter 14

When Ron called Zoe, he was politely told by her mother that Zoe was not at home and that she really didn't know when Zoe would be back from Boston. Yes, she would leave a message. Ron took a deep breath and said, "Please tell her that I'm not going to back at my apartment." Then he looked around at Rahway and said, "Tell her to please leave a message for me at Laureen's."

Mrs. LaDue said, "I'm not sure that she'll be home this evening."

Ron could not help but smile at her assumption and said with a grin that almost showed through the telephone, "That's ok. She can leave the message here anytime over the next few days."

Then he hung the phone up on its wall cradle and walked back through the kitchen passed the very clean sink and down the step into the living room, moving the length of the long, very large room he moved straight to Laureen's door and knocked lightly.

"Come in," said Laureen.

Ron pushed the door open; she was sitting in a chair that was tucked in a corner by the window. It was a low chair and covered with soft brocade of off white linen. She was reading a book that she closed when Ron came in.

"I just need a few minutes," he said.

"Sure."

Ron moved and sat down on her bed. He let his eyes travel around the room. It wasn't the same color as when he and Robin lived in it and the double beds that Warren had strapped together were in his room now.

"Is it gonna freak you out if I take Warren up on his offer?"

"I don't know. I don't think that I'll like living with you. You carry too much baggage of too many memories that you never let me forget, Ron."

"I know. And me being me is not an easy thing for you."

Laureen laughed. "That's certainly true."

"I'm gonna do my best to find a place quickly. I really don't want to stay here. I'm worried about Chris and how it will make him feel."

She laughed again. "Do you think that Chris would be worried about you if the roles were reversed?"

Ron didn't want to answer that. The roles weren't reversed and he knew that Chris would not take that into consideration but they weren't the same people. He had never been Chris, could never have been Chris. "That doesn't really matter."

"So you are just going to spring this on Zoe?"

"We've talked about it." Ron lied. There had been the short conversation that wasn't really a conversation at all.

"She's fragile," said Lauren. "She is the craziest person that I know and that is really saying something. If you use her as someone to make Robin jealous, it will just tear her to pieces and if you do that, I'll never forgive you."

Ron looked straight into her face with his green eyes. He gave her a deep gaze that she did not meet. "We've all done unforgivable things," he said.

"See, that's what I mean, Ron. You do that to me all the time."

"Ok," he said "I'm being defensive. But I'm not interested in fucking Zoe or anyone else over and that includes you. We used to be friends."

"We still are friends," she lied.

"Do you have the number at Zoe's sister's house?"

"No," she said, lying again. "But I might be able to get it."

"I just don't want her to keep calling my apartment and getting no answer."

Laureen thought that after he left, she would call and give Zoe's older sister the whole story and they could figure out how they wanted to handle this.

Ron said, "OK, listen, I'll just try and stay out of your way and make this as painless as possible for you."

"Where do you think you'll live?"

"Somewhere north of here, closer to my school. I want to be close to those kids."

"That's fine," said Lauren, without any interest in which kids and which school he was talking about. She knew that he had taken a job teaching but figured it was definitely a temporary thing.

"If you get the number, leave it for me on the refrigerator."

When he walked back through the living room, classical music was on the stereo and Warren was sitting on his couch with a couple of piles of papers and books stacked neatly on the table in front of him. It felt off balance in a way that made Ron both at ease and uneasy. That's what Warren always did to him. He knew that he could have gone to the car and got his book bag and gotten some much needed work done, but the idea of sitting in the same room while Warren controlled the environment made him want to rebel against the control.

Warren looked up smiling and said, "Did you have a good conversation with Lauren?"

"She's going to get a message to Zoe for me," said Ron.

"I'm going into the city in just a little bit and then the place is yours. You can have either one of the back rooms."

Ron nodded and said, "Thank you, again. I'll be back later." He walked out the back door and listened to the very familiar sound of the chimes as it closed and get into his car and backed out of the driveway and onto St. George's Avenue.

He drove over to the college by a familiar route. He knew all of the approaches and on Saturday afternoon it was a clear sail. He wasn't as sad about the apartment as he thought he would be. The truth was that he always felt half in the hall there and when his landlady had told him that she could get "a good whiff" of his pot in the side alley, he wanted to get out. He did not, however, wish to be burned out.

He wondered if the fire was inside of him still. He had stared into it. It would have hurt him; it would have eaten him if it could have. Then a strange thought occurred to him. Why hadn't it attached to his bed linens? They were certainly flammable. Why had it spread across the top of the couch portion of his hide-a-bed without spreading down around him? Why hadn't he been burnt?

Ron thought about whether or not he was lucky. He wasn't lucky the way that his father was lucky, but his Dad had more skills than he had. He had earned his skills with lots of bruises. Ron had gotten what he inherited there and not done much with it, except for football.

It was the fall and Ron didn't know anything about what the Giants were gonna do. He hadn't followed a team in a long time. Football had grown to mean his knees and what he could no longer do. He had been as good a football player when he wasn't hurt as anyone, well almost anyone. Maybe the game was a part of things he had lost. Maybe Robin was another part of what he had lost. Maybe Welmont was gone too, like the Kennedys and Martin King, and the Viet Nam War. Maybe at 25, he was old enough to have some things be a part of history.

Ron drove passed the college and kept going. This was also a part of history and then he found the car pointed in the direction of Westfield. Colonial Westfield with its snobbery and the history of two people who thought about the most in his life: Chris and Robin. The thought that struck Ron next was that neither one had heard from him since the fire. Robin, as it turned out, had known and had tried to help but Chris knew nothing about any of it.

Laureen was able to reach Zoe easily. First she called Barbara and filled her in. Her friend sounded worried about her sister. "Do you think that he cares for her?"

Laureen answered, "I think that he believes that he does, which is not the same thing, particularly with Ron."

"She's crazy about him," said Barbara.

"Ron isn't the artist that she is, at least I don't think he is, but he gives off this feeling of being able to protect the people that he cares for. They might be good for each other."

"What do you think I should do, Laureen?"

"Give them a chance. Maybe they really are in love."

"Maybe just she's in love and he is getting laid regularly."

"I don't think that's him. I think he'd like to think that's him but I don't think that it is."

Ron circled through Westfield slowly. He drove along Palsted and then over to Robert and then around through the center of town. It looked very pristine and secure. He thought about his time there and how he had never felt like anything more than a loose thread on the fringe of the piece of material that made up the fabric of this place.

Heidi answered Laureen's call on the second ring. Her voice sounded young and filled with spirit. It made Laureen grin. "Heidi, this is Laureen, how are you?"

"I'm more than terrific, Laureen, how are you?"

"I was wondering if Zoe was there."

"Sure, hold on."

It took a long minute for Zoe to come to the phone. Her voice sounded strong although not as exuberant as Heidi's voice had sounded. "Hi Laureen."

"Zoe, Ron's looking for your number."

Zoe almost squealed in delight. "I've been trying to call him. Is he there?"

"He had a problem. He's alright but he had this fire that burnt up his apartment."

"He had a fire," repeated Zoe, "but you're sure that he's OK?"

"He seems fine, a little worse for wear maybe but fine. Zoe, he wants to get in touch with you and he's going to ask you to live with him."

There was a long pause and then a small voice said, "I want to live with him."

"Zoe, Ron's got a lot of baggage."

Another long pause followed by, "I want to talk with him now."

Ron headed his car back towards Rahway. Springsteen was singing Jungleland on his radio and his thoughts drifted along the line of the music. He needed to call New York. He needed to call Zoe.

Returning to Rahway, Ron found the back door open and walked in with the sound of the jingling bells over his head. For a second he thought that it must be what a jester's hat sounded like in a king's court, a bit of a fool. On the refrigerator was a note that read, "Spoke with Zoe, she'll be back tonight, she'll call you as soon

as she gets in.” Ron smiled and opened the refrigerator where the note had been tacked. Except for the crumb bun with his Mom, he could not remember the last time that he’d eaten. There was nothing that he wanted to eat in the frig and so he started brewing a pot of coffee and sat at the oval oak table and rolled joints.

With a hot mug of coffee in one hand, a joint in the other and the phone tucked under his chin, he listened to the phone ring in Chris’s apartment.

“Hello,” said Chris in a voice that seemed almost surprised that someone was calling him.

“Hey Chris, it’s Ron.”

“Hey, what’s happening?”

Ron took a dramatic breath and said, “Well, let’s see...I got burned out of my apartment late last night and it looks like I’m going to have to spend a little time in Rahway with Snake and Sheriff.”

“You got what?” said Chris.

“I had this electrical fire, Chris. It burned up almost everything.”

“Are you OK,” Chris’s voice sounded tremulous.

“Yeah, aside from being homeless, I’m fine.”

“What are you goin’ to do? I mean, do you need help?”

“As usual” said Ron, “I need lots of help, but for now. I’m going to stay in Rahway and see about getting an apartment with Zoe.”

Chris didn’t acknowledge what Ron said about Rahway. It was almost as if it didn’t register. Ron waited for him to bring it up and then saw that he wasn’t going to say anything about it. Ron loved that about Chris. It was something that he wouldn’t have been able to do.

Dragging on the joint and walking back out to his car, Ron walked the book bag back into the kitchen. Although he hadn’t checked, it felt like he was the only one there. He dusted off the bag and got some damp paper towels and tried to rub the remains of the fire off of his work. Then he opened the bag and began to prepare. A second and then a third cup of coffee and the second of the joints and he was deep into his work when he heard the announcing jingle of bells. Laureen walked into the kitchen followed by Zoe and Barbara.

Laureen said, “I see that you’re recovering nicely and making yourself at home.”

Ron didn’t answer her cause in the next seconds Zoe was in his arms and squeezing him with her body and shamelessly rubbing herself against him in front of her sister and her sister’s friend.

Watching them together, Laureen turned to Barbara and said, "Well this is obviously no time for conversation." Then the two girls laughed as Ron and Zoe kissed and stroked and held each other, seemingly oblivious to them.

In Ron's room, they fell onto his bed and she whispered, "It feels like forever since you held me, can you just stick it in me right now?"

Ron did and they came hard together and then they lay in each other's arms, him feeling relieved of a tension that he hadn't realized was building inside of him. She wondered if this was the time that he had impregnated her. "Do you want to live with me?" said Ron.

"I want to live with you and make babies with you," answered Zoe.

Chapter 15

On Sunday morning, he left early with Zoe and drove her up to her father's house and then headed over to see Quimpy. The plan was that he would call her later. Zoe had said that his fire should earn him a day off, but Ron didn't want a day off. He was yearning to be Mr. Tuck on Monday morning.

Quimpy opened his door smiling and bobbing his head. "I just finished making this guacamole and shrimp thing and we got chips and some great exotic buds to smoke."

"Games start yet?" said Ron, not sure who was playing or what time it was.

"Just about," said Quimpy.

Then Ron told him about the fire and what he wanted to accomplish with Zoe. He left out the feeling of the flames on his face and concentrated on the things that he had lost. Quimpy was comfortable in that territory. The living room was a jumble of street furniture and dusty antique tables and stacks of magazines and books. Ron saw that in one corner Quimpy was replaying the Fischer-Spasky matches on a board that was set up with a book about the championship. Ron looked at it but didn't touch anything. In another corner was another desk set up with stuff on the Kennedy assassination. Quimpy had been in contact with this newspaper guy from Dallas and there were his newsletters and their exchanged letters along with a yellow legal pad of notes and books that had been written about what had gone on. Six Seconds in Dallas, next to Whitewash and Rush to Judgment and a strange book called the Rich and the Super-Rich were lying in these piles.

Quimpy noticed Ron looking and said. "Lamar Hunt, now

there's an evil mother-fucker. Texas oil money and connected in unbelievable ways."

Ron nodded. He didn't know who Quimpy was talking about. The one thing that he did know was that if Quimpy thought that it was important that it probably was. It was Quimpy who had been Ron's early mentor, before there was a Lashly and before he became Mr. Tuck. It was Quimpy who had realized that Ron was smart enough to grasp things and began to show him the music of Lightin' Hopkins and Phil Ochs and the talking albums of Mark Twain made by Hal Holbrook.

Now Ron flopped down into a bean bag chair as Quimpy opened a small jelly jar, one of the 30 small jelly jars that he had had sealed from the best pot that they had smoked over the last few years. Ron admired Quimpy's ability to collect and preserve things, even if wherever he lived did seem to have a musky dusty smell that spread across everything.

Midway through the first game, Quimpy stroking his beard said, "I know a studio apartment that might be available right now. It's in Bloomfield and the guy isn't staying there anymore. He left his wife and then got cold feet and went back to her. Everything that you need might be right there, if you can cover the monthly nut."

Chapter 16

Ron Tuck knelt on the kneeling board with his hands folded and draped across the back of the pew in front of him. He was singing as if an angel were listening. His eyes roamed from the face of Sister Bernadette Catherine up to the old altar that was more there as a storage facility, now that the priests had been turned around and a new altar, more a large stone table, had been installed so that the congregation could see what was once hidden and whispered over in secret. The smell of the church sent him back to childhood and the way that he and his friends had gone to mass and stared at the rear ends of the girls in the rows in front of them while the girls smiled knowingly at each other and shifted on their knees and clenched their cheeks on and off to give the boys a little show. He did not want to look at his students that way and so he sang with elevated eyes and his head lifted upwards to the stained glass windows in back of the altar and the mural that must have been over 100 feet in the air.

It was First Friday morning and the school had gone to celebrate the mass that was held mostly for them on that day each month while school was in session. Bernadette Catherine was in charge of the choir of girls' voices and their songs. She

beamed as they sang and moved her raised arms in slow, well timed figure 8's. Ron tried his best to sing as well as he was able, both for her and to set an example for his kids about how it was necessary to open one's mouth when singing. He tried to breathe from his solar plexus and move his stomach to the cadence of the songs. "Holy. Holy, holy, God of Power and Light, Heaven and earth are filled with your Glory, Hosanna, in the highest..." He felt like he was making eye contact with her when they sang and that she could see him trying so hard for her.

Two days earlier, at the convent for dinner with the rest of the lay faculty and the nuns, she had asked him about his faith. They had saved a surprise for him and re-introduced him to Sister Grace Natari, who had been his 7th grade teacher when he had first come to the school. Sr. Grace had remembered Ron and said that she was glad to see him back with their church. She told the story about how Ron had been the first Protestant boy that had ever been allowed to attend the grammar school because his mother had met one of the priests while she was in the American Legion hospital. She told them about how Ron had gotten into trouble with the police and how his mother had come to the church and "begged" to have him admitted because he was on a path that was leading to no good. She smiled recalling how Ron had known scripture and how all the nuns had wanted to convert him to the true faith.

Ron winced when his mother was associated with begging, but he knew that it was true. He had been in trouble. His mother had gone and asked that he be allowed to go to school there. What the nuns didn't know was that the detectives had given Marjorie the choice of either getting Ron into that school or sending him to a reformatory called Jamesburg.

Dinner was spread across five different tables and there had been bottles of wine and salad and chicken and roasted potatoes and string beans. Some of the lay faculty had known enough to bring their own bottles of wine to contribute to the meal. Ron was oblivious to this tradition and because he didn't go to the faculty room for lunch, no one had told him that it was expected. The nuns suffered the lack of contribution patiently and with tight lipped perseverance. Some of them were sure that manners were not something that could be expected from this disturbingly popular young man.

When they prayed before dinner, Ron blessed himself with the others, feeling less awkward than he had before. He ate slowly not wanting to appear overly hungry. There was polite talk at the tables and soft bouncing polite laughter. Ron grinned and talked, not noticing that he was the only lay person seated at his table. He did not know that the table arrangements were a thing that was the

object of discussion before the dinner and that some of the nuns had wanted very much to sit with him and others had expressed a desire to sit anywhere else rather than with him.

The mass reached the point of communion and the girls dutifully filed up to receive. Ron was unsure about what to do. Part of him wanted to move up, to be an example for his students. But what kind of an example would a lie be? What kind of example was he able to provide spiritually anyway? Wasn't it all a lie when it came to that?

Ron got up and moved down the aisle towards the priest. He was determined to take the wafer in the new fashion and not to open his mouth and stick out his tongue as he had been taught. He cupped his hands hoping against hope that he was doing it right and looked into the thin worn face of the silver haired priest who seemed to hesitate for an instant before placing the wafer in his hand. Ron took it and was surprised by the lack of magic that he felt on his tongue. A cascade of memory voices used to flood him about not letting it touch his teeth and certainly not chewing it. The host was to remain on his tongue until it dissolved.

At the convent, Ron noticed that as the evening grew later that the voices around him got looser and the faces of the people became pink and red. The laughter was easier now and when Ron looked up he saw that some of the people had already left. Sister Bernadette Catherine took his hands and said softly, "When the weather gets bad Ron, you can stay here with us if it becomes necessary."

Chapter 17

At Halloween, the students were allowed to dress up. They came dressed as witches and angels and cats. Ron hung a skeleton up over his door but did not dress up himself. The girls giggled as they entered his room, halos tilted, witch hats crumpled and cat tails sticking up and bouncing along behind them. Ron's first thought was that this was going to be a difficult day. He tried to think of ways that he could have fun and still make it productive. Some of the girls had not dressed up at all and looked embarrassed by their navy blue skirts and white tops. Some just wore silly hats and put on makeup that gave them a clownish appearance.

"Where's your costume, Mr. Tuck?" said Andrea.

Ron laughed. "I wear a costume every day, Andrea."

When he was a young boy, his mother would dress him in her clothes because of how much he looked like her. He cringed as the thought sprang into his

mind. What was she thinking of, dressing a young boy up like a girl! It had left him never wanting to wear a Halloween costume again.

Ron drew columns that he crossed with lines that made them squares on the board and said, "Do you guys know the game Jeopardy?" Their smiles told him that they did. "Today we are going to play team jeopardy. This side of the room, push your desks together and this side do the same thing. The winners will get 25 points on the next quiz."

Now Ron had to think about categories that they would know something about. He wrote across the top History, Vocabulary, Music, TV, Movies, and Literature.

Ron figured out some rules and told them that each side would get a chance at the same question until someone got it right. If there was any calling out of answers from the other side it would not count. There was no penalty for wrong answers, just points for right answers. Each girl would get to answer a question for a point value. The questions would be harder depending on the number of points. Only the girl whose turn it was got to answer the question, but she could get help from the others on her team.

The girls were excited and squirmed in their desks. "Where are you gonna get the questions from?" said Maria.

Ron pointed to the side of his head and said, "From here."

Quickly, he filled in the point values and then he saw Sister Irene Emmanuel opening his door and walking into the back of his classroom. She sat down quietly with a small pad and nodded, smiling to the girls. Ron was stunned. This was the class that she was gonna watch him teach? After all of the gritty work that he had done with them over the last two months, this was the day that she picked to observe him? Too late to do anything about it now! Ron looked at the board and at his smiling students and then thought, "Fuck it," this is what he told them that he was going to do and this is what he was doing.

The first girl, Sadie, chose TV for 20 points. Ron thought for a moment and said. "What is the name of the bald NY Detective who chews lollipops because he has quit smoking cigarettes?"

A girl in back of Sadie whispered into her ear and then Sadie's face brightened and she said, "Kojak."

Ron smiled as Sister Irene began to write. "Correct!"

He put the 20 in a column on the side. Then he saw Andrea whispering to her friends and the next girl picked vocabulary for 30.

Ron said, "OK, from the story *The Open Window* what does the word endeavored mean?"

The team got it right and for the next 30 minutes his students ignored TV and movies and music and asked questions about history and literature and vocabulary. Ron could have kissed each one of them as the class ended. He knew what had happened. They had tried to save him. In the process they had shown Sister Irene what he had taught them about literature and vocabulary and history. Even the nun was smiling by the end of the class. She stopped by Ron's desk and said that he should come to her office during his free period.

After lunch, Ron waited outside of the principal's office like a kid in trouble. They had done a great job but was she going to buy his method? Sister Irene came to the door all black and white and starched and scrubbed clean. He followed her into her office and waited to be asked to sit. Never having done this before, he wasn't sure what was supposed to happen. When the vocabulary and history and literature questions had run out, Ron had put new point values up to keep it going. His kids had made it seem like it was always that way. "That's an interesting review technique that you use, Mr. Tuck," began the principal.

Ron decided to just blurt out the truth. "When I saw the costumes and how they were all wound up, Sister, I made it up so that we could at least get a good review in."

The nun arched her eyebrow, "You made that up as you went along?"

"Yes, Sister," said Ron bowing his head. "I wanted it to be a fun day but not a wasted day."

The nun stared at him for a long moment and then said, "We try to keep popular culture out of our studies as much as possible, but given the day and the way that it turned out, there's not a lot that I can criticize you for today," she paused and pursed her lips, "except your handwriting. Mr. Tuck, is it necessary to assault the blackboard the way that you do and press down so firmly on the chalk?"

Ron stammered. "I'm not sure what you mean, Sister."

"I've had complaints that you press so hard on the chalk, Mr. Tuck, that it is necessary to wash your boards every night. Do you think you could write a little more lightly and perhaps even a little less sloppily?"

"I can try, Sister or I can just wash them myself at the end of the day."

The nun was inwardly amused at his response. Of course she had set up him by going in there on Halloween, but he had passed her little test very well. She did need to talk with him about some things though. "There's another matter, Mr.

Tuck. Some of the girls have taken to writing your name over and over on their books like you were a boyfriend."

"I didn't know that, Sister," said Ron, genuinely surprised.

"These are very impressionable minds, Mr. Tuck, and it is important that we don't overstep our boundaries."

"I understand, Sister," said Ron hanging his head again.

"I'm sure that you do. It was a nice review, Ron and I was pleased to see how much vocabulary they've learned. That's what we are going to call your lesson, a literature and vocabulary review. Do you understand?"

Ron wasn't sure that he did understand but he nodded anyway.

Then the nun said, "And Mr. Tuck, John is spelled J...o...h...n.....not Jh ...o...n." She enunciated each letter clearly and with what Ron could have sworn was a clicking of her tongue against her teeth.

His face felt flush hot with embarrassment. Had he really miss-spelled John?

"Yes, Sister. I'm sorry about that, Sister"

"Do you realize how much you pace while you are teaching, Ron. It was making me dizzy to watch you."

"I guess that it's just nervous energy."

"Perhaps you can find a way to channel your nervous energy more efficiently, Mr. Tuck."

When Ron got back to his and Zoe's apartment he saw her naked body running towards the bedroom when he opened the door. The table was set for dinner and across his plate were six willow switches that she had cut from one of the trees. He stared at them with his mouth open. Zoe was kneeling on the bed with her head down on the pillows and her ass raised up towards the door. Without turning around to face him she said into her pillow, "I played with myself today while you were gone. Please don't hit me too hard." Ron laughed and fingered the switches, and then he began to strip off his clothing. The thought crossed his mind that this was one way of channeling his nervous energy.

Slowly, he slid the switches across her raised cheeks. He smiled when he saw that she strained upwards for the contact. He turned them so that the thin, young leaves, spiny and long, slid along her flesh. She whimpered and then he took the end of one of the switches and slid it between her thighs, under her cheeks along her puffed, opening lips. She trembled. He slid them up and down and rotated his wrist so that they would drag along that special place, then he pulled them back and smacked her ass with them. The air hissed as they snapped towards her. Ron

felt himself twitch and she moaned. He slapped them across her cheeks fanning them out so that they covered her raised, trembling, slightly reddened flesh. They broke with snaps that surged through him. They fell on the lounge cushions that were their bed and he broke them over her bottom with hissing, plaintive swats that sent them into pieces.

She turned to him as he dropped down onto his knees. She tugged at the stiffness of his penis. She licked her tongue across the tip of it. Ron was sticking out with his eyes closed, swaying like an inebriated creature. She lay on her belly and thrust up from underneath him with a hope of impalement that slid along his shaft with a wave of intoxicating chills. Then Ron pointed it at her and stuck it right in. Zoe's arms and legs flung out. She screamed some kind of deep, wordless wish. The liquid releases convulsing through them like a whirling machine that had gone full sprint.

Afterwards they smiled that kind of self satisfied grin that rises from deep inside and holds you like a warm glow of the sun. Zoe stuck her elbow out across the mattress and cradled his head in her hand. She put on her glasses and inspected him.

He was lean, thick-boned with an oval face and spring green eyes that took each signal that she sent and then spun it back to her. Ron smiled and let his eyes explore her. From time to time, he extended his hand to part a thigh, or lift an arm. The warm glow in her belly heated as she noted his approval.

Ron said, "The girls came dressed in costumes today."

The idea caused her eyes to shimmer like a long caress and then she gazed at him strong and deep and said, "Do you want me to wear a costume?"

Ron's eyes let off excited sparks that flew at her and she smiled when they entered her like they were his seed. "Let's make something," she said

Ron took a scissors to a pair of her cutoffs. He left the seam that ran between her legs and cut an outline of wings to stretch across her thighs and cheeks. Then he cut away the intruding white of her pockets. Then he cut U shapes for where her pockets had been. He slipped the remains of the cutoff's up snugly while she put on a sheer blouse that she had decorated to accent her nipples, which it covered in a tight pull that was drawn down by inserted ribbons that gathered the fabric up, so that it seemed she was lifting her shirt from her body but was frozen in that pose. Ron, his hands on her hips, held her at the length of his arms; she swiveled back and forth for him.

Then they heard the first buzzer of the evening go off in the October quest for candy. Ron gave her two bars and squeezed her mostly naked cheeks as they

jutted out with anticipation and the promise of a quick slap that sent her to answer the door. He followed her, wanting to see the reaction and the way that she responded to it. She looked back at him and extended her arms with the candy in her hands, asking him to do it. Ron made her wait and watched her squirm and then took the candy and opened the door. Two little girls dressed up like ducks held their bags open and chorused "Trick or Treat."

Ron filled their bags and then he shut the door and dropped to his knees and slowly swirled his tongue up her exposed taunt inner thighs. She came for him almost immediately.

They lay with the bag of miniature candy bars between them. Zoe told him that she wanted to go to New York and get a piece of alabaster that weekend. Ron smiled and asked what that was like.

"There are rooms filled with chunks of stone, different sizes." She set her hands at shoulder width and navel to nipple height. "I want a piece of white alabaster this big," she said.

Ron said, "How do you know which piece to take?"

Zoe said, "I embrace it and see if it hugs me back."

"Can I touch them?" said Ron, eyes like fireworks now.

Her smile spread from her mouth to her ears and she said, "That's why I want you to come with me." Then she glanced back and forth quickly and said, "Remember your cat poem?"

Ron nodded, and his mind flashed on Leni in his kitchen, slinky, inquisitive and devoted to him. He recited,

"A piece of cheese very small, curled up on its end and stuck to the floor, attracted a black cat with licked white paws.

Raw chopped meat excited her more, and she made sounds for more

I was ecstatic, I wanted her to stay, so I gave her some more cheese

She licked it; she liked it,

Better than the first piece that she'd seen

I had made a friend that I could keep and tell her so out loud

She would agree, nod her head and make such friendly sounds

I dropped some bread, she gave it a clout

Raised her head licked her chin

Turned around and walked out"

"I want to draw it," said Zoe. "I can see her." Ron recited the poem again and again as Zoe drew.

Sitting at a desk that Zoe gave him, a blonde oak blank door frame laid over a set of custom made saw horses, Ron opened the Literature book to Canterbury Tales. Immediately, he was flooded with memories of the stage. He was playing Henry II and his partner for the scene was Thomas Becket, played by Todd Crumbly, who later became known as The Crumb after her flipped subsequent to being caught selling joints out of a rooming house in Elizabeth. He'd flipped on Chris and some other people but this was before that and before he discovered his guitar and heavy dope. Ron circled him hissing and screaming like a predator while Todd stood there looking vulnerable and contrite.

Canterbury Tales was about what happened after Henry had Beckett stabbed to death and he become a martyr. Ron absorbed the pages and the details of the Prologue. He saw how the ways that labor was divided were important things for his students to see. The colors they wore and the imperfections used to describe them gave the characters the substance and humanity that Ron wanted to communicate to his kids.

Naked, Zoe was drawing with charcoals; pad on her lap knees bent up, hair tangled and an aura to the movements of her arm. Her pink and straw colored body was intent on creation.

Ron stared back to the page and as he read about the Oxford Cleric, and The Squire and The Cook. He imagined each of them fucking her. He saw her lifting herself up to the pounding thrusts of each of their detailed, clothed bodies and he wanted to be all of them and still be himself. Then he put his book aside and wrote for himself.

Chapter 18

Chris read but the words blurred and made him look away. He slipped his glasses over his nose and tried again. He tried to concentrate on his belief that the law was the rules through which people organized their principles. His reporting parts provided a series of responses that that drove him toward reverie but then

he tried to rally himself with thoughts of getting dressed. He was too easily defeated with an opening of windows and a needle on a track and a song that could put him right.

He sat in the open window with the law book on the sill and his head and knee bouncing to a beat. He could do this, it wasn't that hard. It required more time than deep thought. Reporting parts quieted and listened to the song and inside of it all he was able to think with just a few minutes of clarity that came and went. Mose Allison cooed, "Everybody's crying mercy but nobody knows the meaning of the word."

Chris didn't think about the list of callbacks that he could make. If he wanted to hear a voice. He would call and if he wanted a presence, he could make it appear. For now, there was the book and the music and the street sounds and the promise of a walk. Reporting parts had different volumes and illuminations. Anything might be turned down or faded to black. It was right to wait for what the tide brought in, inspect what it carried, sort through and move on. Dancing like figurines in compartments, reporting parts had occasional convulsive rhythms that crested and subsided.

Warren and Laureen were perfect together, particularly since he had managed to avoid the entangling loops of both of their snares. He looked back into the book and brought the print into focus. Reading and taking notes while the light faded and the street music rose in back of it.

Later he did yoga, turning the stereo off and listening to his heartbeat and the continual hum that ebbed and flowed outside of his windows. He longed for the place of silence, not the silence that he had learned to use as a weapon, not the cold and predatory place where emotions waited and sharpened, not the resistant silence, but the honey hued invitation of his breathing and the steady strong beat of his heart.

It made him light headed and that told him that he was hyperventilating and that he must slow it down even further if he was ever to develop a means of travel to reach this new and quiet place. He read and took notes and tried not to think about the lures that would cause him to wander. He picked up his guitar and began to play and for the first time ever, it was one of Ron's songs that he heard in his heart and played through his fingers. Chris fought the nets of incompetence and felt well rendered. He breathed in New York City and thought of Laureen: slinky, smart and able to make him cry. Then he played the blues song and tried to remember the words. There were other rhythms in it and he searched for them.

Just as it was feeling right, it would make him stumble, like she tried to do. It was almost uncanny.

Chapter 19

“What is a pilgrimage and why did people go on them?” Ron was pacing. The chalk rolling between his fingers while his students watched him like they were at a tennis match. It was a very warm day for early November and the windows were cranked wide open. The students seemed fidgety because of the change in temperature and the excess of clothing. He had them trained to have their notebooks open at the start of each class. He kept a supply of pens and pencils in a canister on his desk and anyone who had forgotten to bring one could just walk up and take one. If you hadn’t brought your book, you had to sit with someone else, but then you knew his eyes were going to be on you and that you were sure to get called on at least a couple of times. Their initial testing period of him was over. He could be flustered by them but it was much more likely that they were gonna wind up blushing on account of the way that he turned things and his class was fun. They wanted to read for it.

Andrea said, “It’s like a journey or a vacation.”

Ron smiled, “You mean like going down the shore?”

Andrea felt herself redden. “No, not like that. They didn’t have boardwalks or anything like that.”

Ron paced and ran his fingers through his hair. “Well, they did in a way. They had this shrine for this guy Tom who was a patron saint of the Saxons, who were kinda like the poor. Everybody felt good about Tom now that he was dead, and people would take trips to the place that was dedicated to him.”

Andrea sat back in her desk and spread her legs wide open under her desk, the short skirt hiking up along her thighs. Ron pacing saw her white patch of panties and turned his head to keep his mind focused.

“But the trip could be dangerous, like going out for a walk by yourself in the middle of the night around here. And so people traveled in groups and as they went, they made up stories to tell to entertain each other.”

Now her legs were opening and shutting like a bird that was flapping its wings, only slower. Ron was hoping that she needed to go to the bathroom or that she would stop because he was finding it more and more difficult not to look. He

took off his jacket and noticed that his shirt was wet from the perspiration that had gathered underneath.

“So these stories were things that they made up as part of a contest to see who could tell the best story.”

“You shoulda been there, Mr. Tuck. You woulda kicked butt.”

Ron laughed and the grin spread across his face and showed his dimples and the girls smiled and one with bleached bright blonde hair who had a case of acne that would not quit said, “But they were all religious stories right?”

“Some of them were, Joyce, but some of them were pretty raunchy.”

There was a giggle and then one of his seniors who liked to look confused because she thought that it was attractive said, “What’s raunchy?”

“Off- color stories,” said Ron.

The blonde grinned at him and said, “You mean dirty stories?”

There was that nervous laughter that bounced through the room like a crazy ball that was careening off the walls. The blonde wiggled herself back and forth on her seat and made a show of renewed interest in her book and then said, “Ok let’s read those and skip the others.”

It gave Ron an idea. He was learning that if he threw things out to them and listened to how they reacted that something would be revealed to him, a way into the piece and there it was. “What we are gonna do is divide up the stories and tell them to each other like we are on the journey together. Each of you is gonna pick one and read it and put it into your own words and then we are gonna tell the stories to each other. Now there are some that we have to tell and I will handle those if you don’t pick them first but for the rest of them, you need to look the book over, skim the characters and decide whose story that you want to tell. Some of them are long, some are really short and some are really exciting and some are really boring. I’ll try to keep you away from the boring junk.”

Andrea was flapping faster Ron was wondering if he should ask her if she needed to use the bathroom and then the absurdity of asking a 17 year old girl if she needed to pee struck him and he dismissed that idea.

There was a knock at his door a light tapping, but Ron didn’t hear it. He was at the board and writing down names of the pilgrims for the kids to choose from. He rattled off the first dozen or so from memory and then he was looking in the prologue to find the others. The girls heard the tapping immediately. Their heads all turning towards the door and then their eyes going straight down to their books and their hands making sure that they were copying what he was writing on the

board. There was a second set of taps and this time Ron looked up to see the face of Sister Irene Emanuel standing in his doorway with a crooked finger that was beckoning him. He walked quickly to the door as she opened it and backed up and asked him to step into the hallway.

“Yes Sister?”

“Mr. Tuck, you have your jacket off.”

“Yes Sister, it’s really warm today.”

“But Mr. Tuck, your bare arms are dangling out.”

Ron blushed and looked at his arms and then back into her face. She turned him into a child almost instantly but he liked her. He trusted her and above all else he wanted to please her and have her think well of him. “Yes Sister, I’ll put the jacket back on right away.”

She nodded with a serene kind of admonishment and said, “That’s an excellent idea,” and walked back down the hall towards her office, the black habit floating along just above her feet.

Ron walked back into the room and as his students watched put his jacket back on immediately.

Joyce said, “Busted.” And the girls giggled.

Ron smiled and said, “Yes the sight of my arms is apparently an unnecessary distraction.” and went back to writing at the board.

Andrea said to Joyce, “Wasn’t his arms that I was staring at?”

Ron noticed that he lit up in a gleeful way when he taught his younger students. It wasn’t that the lessons were easier to do or that he liked the literature more, it was them. They rushed into the room eager to be there, to be in contact with him and he brightened so visibly at the sight of them that it was almost as if he became someone else. It was their writing that he pondered over. It was their questions that reappeared in his mind on his drives or when he was in the shower, never when he was with Zoe. He wanted to keep them to himself, to mold them. At the end of the day it was they who flew passed his room and stuck their heads in and wished him good night.

That afternoon Ron left his class room early to attend a faculty meeting. Sister Irene Emanuel presided over these meetings with a look that commanded respect. She could use her facial expressions to convey her thoughts, particularly to accent what she wasn’t saying. Looking freshly laundered and finely scrubbed, she smiled at the gathering of her teachers and said. “Well it seems that we have settled in nicely and started the year off well and gotten through the foolishness of

Halloween. Our enrollment is up by 30 and so we now have 485 students, which, all things considered, must be thought of as successful. Now, paper is not free and I have been finding too much of it wasted and discarded into the trash. Please remember that the girls do have notebooks and that it isn't necessary to give them our paper for every little thing that they do. Also, please remember that we are not a provider of pens and pencils. The girls know that they need to come prepared and it would be wrong of us to spoil them."

Ron felt heat come to his cheeks. He wondered if this was directed at him. Maybe he was being foolish and spoiling them but wasn't it more important for them to learn. He almost raised a hand to ask this but then thought better of it.

Sister Irene Emanuel continued after a pause and a scan of her eyes and a pursing of her lips that communicated that she was not talking about the sisters who knew better. The nuns smiled and looked down. This had been a topic of discussion at the convent. They knew it was coming and she had delivered the line expertly, although one or two would not have minded if she had singled out the prime offenders. "Now the subject of discipline needs to be discussed. We are instituting a system of demerits." She passed out a stack of freshly copied pages that were passed up the aisles. "I'm not going to read to you. Take a moment and look over the page."

Ron read quickly. It was a system of offenses and the number of demerits that each carried with it.

Late: 1 demerit

Uniform violation: 1 demerit (first offense) 3 demerits (second offense and a call home) 5 demerits (for each additional offense and a parent conference) Excessive makeup is a uniform violation.

No homework: 1 demerit and an academic penalty

Failure to be respectful: 3 demerits

Unprepared for class: 1 demerit (this includes lack of book covers, or coming to class without the necessary tools for that day)

Fighting: 10 demerits (a parent conference in the principal's office)

Inappropriate Behavior: the number of demerits assigned for this is at the discretion of the teacher. (Whatever she thinks is appropriate.)

Conduct unbecoming a lady: 2 demerits but perhaps more depending on the severity of the offense.

Inwardly, Ron groaned as he read the list. It was all about class control. He had no problems with class control. Why should anyone have a problem with it? Ron knew enough to not say any of these things. He sat and listened.

“Today we are going to form a faculty council that will meet with girls who have exceeded the ten demerit limit. I know that any of you that are chosen will take this responsibility seriously. There will be five members of the council, two lay teachers, two sisters and myself.”

Ron nodded and looked around wondering who he would think was best. Sister Juliana Marie was quickly nominated as was Sister Bernadette. Ron knew both. Juliana taught math in the classroom above his and Sister Bernadette taught religion and led the choir. Marsha was nominated and quickly confirmed by the staff as one of the senior lay teachers. Then Irene Emanuel said, “I think the addition of a male presence would help us in our cause and without asking for a vote looked over at Ron and said, “Would you be kind enough to join our effort Mr. Tuck?”

Ron almost gasped. Then he said as obediently as he was able, “Yes Sister”

Chapter 20

Zoe sat naked in the middle of the room. She held the shirt that Ron had worn yesterday up to her face and inhaled the traces of his scent. With her other hand, she worked the hard plastic buttons on the cuff of the shirt back and forth over her clitoris. Her eyes were closed. She imagined herself flying through the air and he was flying with her, his head between her legs, his tongue snapping the way that it did across her clit. Her mouth opened and she rocked back and forth and then, in the dream, he opened his mouth and began to devour her. He took large bites out of her vagina, chewing and swallowing her. She tried to fly faster, tried to get away from his mouth but he was devouring her from between her legs. Her hips bucked faster over the buttons, the hard buttons that could have been teeth. She

was sweating and smiling at the same time. He was eating away all of her fat. She would be thin if he kept eating at her. The waves of the orgasm rushed over her and she bucked her hips faster. Then he was spitting her out. Parts of her dropping down from the sky and wherever they dropped, flowers sprang up and tried to ensnare her. It was the fat trying to get back into her. He was spitting her out. He was just like she was. She raised her fingers from between her legs and stuck them down into her throat and then began to gag into his shirt and then the burn of the vomit, the harsh gritty feel of the vomit in her mouth, making her pay for what she had eaten. Her body wretched and shook and still she was cumming. Then she got up and ran into the bath room, frightened as a little girl. She scrubbed the shirt clean of what had come out of her, her entire body shaking. Now she could draw. She sketched the likeness of a fat hippo sucking on a straw that was stuck into an ice cream sundae.

When Ron came home, he found her curled up in his aunt's wingback chair. She had been crying. Her hands were in front of her mouth. She watched him walk in and drop his book bag down and take off his jacket and then walk towards her. She held up a hand for him to stop before he reached her.

"Why do you want to live with me?"

"What?"

"I'm a pig. Why do you want to live with a pig?"

"You aren't a pig."

"I'm a fat, filthy, disgusting pig and I don't want to be with someone who could stand to live with a fat, filthy, disgusting pig."

"You aren't fat. You aren't a pig. You aren't disgusting."

He stood in front of her an expression of complete confusion on his face. "Did you have a bad day?"

She screamed and ran passed him into the bathroom and locked the door. Ron stood there feeling helpless. What was he supposed to do now? What was wrong with her? What did he have to do to fix it? He paced through the apartment rooms. His stomach growled at him, a reminder that he hadn't eaten all day, nothing except coffee. He picked up the mail that he had gathered from his parents' house the day before and sorted through it. The envelope in Robin's handwriting made him drop the stack of mail like he had been given an electric shock. Was this it? Had she seen the letter? It was still sealed. Had she found a way to open it or read it through the envelope? The door opened and she walked out fast, her face angry. "I'm going to take the train back to my father's house."

"Why?"

"Because I can't stand to be cooped up in this ugly apartment all day long. I want to run. I want to swim. I want to ride my bike."

"I'll drive you, if you really want to go, Zoe."

"There's no place for me to be free here," she screamed. "I'm dying here."

Ron felt like he had been slapped. He felt as if he took a step off the curb and that some bus had whacked him in the side of the head. "Wait," he said.

She dropped her bag to the floor and he moved to her and gathered her into his arms. She was crying and shaking and her body trembled like a leaf in a stiff breeze. She reached her arms up and held onto him, like he was the branch that was keeping her from being torn off. "I'm so fucked up," she whispered, "and I don't want you to see me like this."

Ron patted her ass and said "Go clean yourself up and get dressed."

She went back into the bathroom and Ron picked up the envelope and opened it. "I'll be arriving on Wednesday on Flight 148 on American Airlines. It gets in at 8 pm. See you then. Love, Robin." Wednesday, today was Tuesday. Ron walked to the bathroom door and said, "Maybe a few days up at your parents' house will help you to clear your head."

She opened the door. She looked like the angelic child again. "You won't mind?"

"If it's what you need, it's what we should do," said Ron.

Her face brightened. "I just want to run and swim and get my head in a better place so that I can come back to you healthy," she said.

Ron nodded. "It's ok. I trust you."

Someplace inside a voice told him that he should be feeling very guilty, but he wasn't. He would tell Robin that he was staying with his folks until he figured out what to do about an apartment. She definitely would not want to go to his mother's house. Funny, he thought, she calls it her father's house and I call it my mother's house. Is it a gender thing?

That night after he drove Zoe, and picked up a pizza, he sat at his desk and called Robin. She answered on the first ring.

"Where are you?" she said. "The phone is disconnected and I really didn't want to be calling Rahway again so I wrote in care of your parents' house."

"That's where I'm staying, just until I get things sorted out. I didn't want to stay at Rahway. I'm sure you can understand why."

She laughed. "No, actually I thought that any excuse that got you back into Rahway would be the one that you would take."

Ron flushed. "Contrary to popular opinion, I do have some integrity, Robin."

"Anyway," she said, "Can you pick me up?"

"Absolutely."

"How's the teaching going?"

"It's incredible. It's where I want to be. It's who I am. It may be the best thing that I've ever done in my life."

"That's good, Ron. Just remember that you aren't Warren."

Ron's hand clenched on the receiver. Why did she have to say shit like that?

His voice was small. "I don't drawl," he said with fake drawl.

She giggled. "I'm really looking forward to seeing you and everyone else."

Ron felt panicked. Who was everyone else? "How long are you staying?"

"Let's see how it goes. Ron, I'm not sure how much longer I'm going to be staying in Minneapolis. Things have gotten complicated here and I am thinking of coming back home."

Ron felt his pulse quicken. Zoe cleared from his mind like she was a hallucination. "There is nothing that I would like more than that."

And then they hung up.

A minute later the phone rang. Zoe's voice said, "I miss you so much. I don't want to sleep without you next to me."

Chapter 21

Ron was waiting as they walked into the room. He was amazed at how he could forget and did forget anything else that was on his mind as soon as he saw them. They stood, said their customary prayer before the start of class and then opened their books.

"Ok, so last night you read a story and then rewrote it into your words, correct?"

Some faces nodded and others looked down. Ron knew that meant that some had found the assignment too difficult to finish or had not done it for one reason or another, so he decided to go with volunteers. "Joyce, why don't you go first."

Joyce looked nervous. Her "OK" was timid.

Ron said, "Come right up here in front of the room and stand behind my lectern."

“Do I have to do it from up there? Can’t I just sit here?”

Ron thought. Yes, he could understand how being in front of the class could be intimidating. But Joyce sat near the back of the room and he wanted everyone to see her face while she was telling the story. Then an idea. “Ok, what we are gonna do is make a big circle with the desks.”

Joyce smiled. Some of the girls groaned their teenaged “Do we have to move” complaint. But they did it. Ron waited as the desks scraped and pulled across the floor and then there was not what you could call a circle but a perimeter around the outside of the room. Ron moved into the center of it. “Pens out, notebooks open, you are responsible to take notes on what Joyce says.”

Ron looked over at Joyce. Her head was bent over her notes and she was moving it back and forth, her lips moving. Then she looked up at him and smiled and then giggled at the other faces that were staring at her.

“Which story did you pick Joyce?”

“The Miller.”

“Do you know why you picked that one?”

“Yeah, my sister, who graduated last year, said it was a dirty one.”

Nervous giggles spread across the room. Joyce began. “This old guy John marries a young girl named Allison. Now why a young girl would marry this old guy,” She elongated the old. “We don’t know but she did. I mean maybe the guy had money, or maybe she was just stupid. She seems kinda dumb, but anyway she married him.” Joyce put her hand down to her hip behind the desk. “And of course she was bored.” Joyce paused. “And frustrated.” The girls laughed. Ron smiled. “But she was stuck with him. Until this other guy whose name I can’t pronounce and so I decided to call him Abe,”

“Absalom,” said Ron.

“Yeah that’s it. Abe starts coming around and telling her that he can’t live without her. But he’s such a dork even if he is young, he’s just too dorky. Even her husband laughs at him.” Ron smiled as she continued with the story. It was working. They were listening to every word. He walked around the back of the outside of the perimeter as Joyce continued and told about Absalom and Allison and John. “So now this guy Nicky comes along and Nicky was hot!” Joyce smiled again and paused. Then she said, “I mean slick and handsome a good dresser and knows how to talk.” Ron noticed three heads turn in the direction of a girl named Marion a pretty girl who was very quiet and really not buying into what Ron had been doing so far. Her responses had been terse and clearly designed to make him leave her alone whenever he questioned her. Joyce was looking at her and smiling as she described

Nicky but Marion was not smiling back and there was immediate tension in the room. Ron felt it and saw and knew, he instinctively knew. He decided to interrupt.

"Ok wait a second Joyce. I'm seeing a lot of Nicky's in people's notebooks, his name was Nicholas right?"

"Yeah Mr. Tuck, but you said in our words right?"

Ron shrugged, "You're right Joyce, I'm sorry."

But he had relieved the tension and Marion no longer had a real excuse to think Joyce was talking about her boyfriend he thought, feeling proud of his instincts. "So Nicky, cause he's a dog, wants to sleep with Alison and cause she's bored and frustrated and a slut wants to be with him too."

Now it was Ron's turn to feel uncomfortable. Was it alright for them to say that the character was a slut? But then he looked at the faces and saw that each one of them including Marion was hanging on every word and said to himself, "Screw it."

Joyce went on and she did a good job. She even got through the farting in face business and made it seem so natural that all Ron heard was a couple of "Ewws" from different parts of the room.

When Joyce finished Ron said, "You did a really good job with that, excellent in fact. So what is the moral?"

Marion raised her hand. Ron called on her. "They had no morals, like some of the people in here."

During lunch, Joyce and Marion fought. It was a face slap that led to a hair pull and a ripped uniform top and scratches down the sides of the necks of both girls. Sister Irene Emanuel called Ron down to her office. He saw both girls sitting outside of her closed doors staring daggers across the room at each other, while the old nun who served as a secretary sat at her desk in between them. Ron was shocked when he saw them.

"What happened?" he said to Joyce. She looked down and was silent.

He walked over to Marion. "Was this about the story in class?"

Marion just stared at him.

"Sister is waiting for you, Mr. Tuck"

Ron opened the door of the office. Irene Emanuel was seated in back of her desk reading and looked up at him over the top of her bifocals. "Well, it seems that we have had a problem and although the faculty council hasn't met yet, I thought that it would be a good chance for you to see how things work, Mr. Tuck."

"I think I may have had something to do with it, Sister."

"You?"

"Yes Sister, it started in class. I was having them retell Canterbury Tales in their own words and I think Marion was offended by Joyce using the name Nicky. I think Nicky may be Marion's boyfriend."

"Mr. Nick Bontieri is Marion's father, Mr. Tuck. And it seems as if Marion's father has," she paused pursing her lips and thinking about how she wanted to say it. "not been behaving himself. But that is no excuse for this. These girls have to learn that if they break the rules, they get punished."

Now Ron was even more shocked than he had been before. "Joyce knew about it?"

"Joyce and Marion were friends and of course the one girl shared things about her home life which was better not shared and so when they stopped being friends, of course, there were hurt feelings. As far as I can tell, this was revenge."

"I'm sorry, Sister."

"What are you sorry for? You did nothing wrong. Perhaps you got used a little bit, but you would be awfully foolish if you thought that you could teach these girls and not have them try to manipulate you."

"I don't know," Ron said. "I saw the tension in the room and I thought I had dissipated it. I thought it was a boyfriend issue. I was wrong."

"And is this the first time in your life that you have had the unpleasant realization that you were incorrect in your judgment, Mr. Tuck?"

"No, Sister."

"Then it is hardly worth mentioning, is it?"

Ron broke into his dimpled grin. "I guess not."

"Well, sit over here on my left while we conduct our own little version of justice, Mr. Tuck"

Ron moved his chair over in back of her desk and to her left. She turned to him and said, "Half of the time I wish this was a boarding school so that we could minimize the influence of their parents. But we work with what we have." Then she buzzed for the girls.

They walked in one after the other, looking guilty, wearing the marks on their necks, and their puffy red eyes as both signs of their crime and also, Ron thought, with a certain amount of pride. These were tough kids who had grown up in a tough neighborhood. They may have been frightened of this very proper nun, but they knew that they could take whatever it was that she had in store for them. And besides, it had been worth it. Joyce had gotten completely under Marion's skin and shattered that "I'm better cause I'm prettier" façade of hers. Marion had loved the hot sting on her hand when she had slapped Joyce right on her pimply face. Marion

was thinking that when she told the story later she would say that when she had slapped her that she had popped one of her zits and had to wash her hands forever just to make sure the puss was gone.

Ron was about to learn that out and out declarations of war between girls was never over. They would carry a hatred of each other for the rest of their lives unless of course something radical happened.

"Well ladies, have we anything else to add?"

The girls were silent. Irene Emanuel waited and then said, "Did I mumble? Are your ears too clogged with wax to have heard me?"

Both girls mumbled, "No Sister," in unison.

Irene Emanuel turned to Ron. "Are you allowing these girls to speak in class Mr. Tuck? Have you been keeping them so quiet that they have lost any power of elocution?"

"Not at all, Sister," said Ron careful to enunciate distinctly.

"Good, although sometimes it is best to hold one's tongue, isn't it Joyce?"

"Yes, Sister."

"And to learn to retain your dignity as well. Isn't that true, Marion?"

"Yes, Sister"

"Since we have not given you the proper demeanor that your parents have sent you here to achieve, since we as a school have failed you, and are shortly sending you out into the world in an obvious state of ill-preparedness, we shall have to try harder in these few months that we have left. Therefore for the next month, each of you will spend Saturday morning working and praying with us in the convent. I will be speaking to your parents this evening. It would be best for both of you to come clean, as they say, before my call."

"But Sister, I have a job on Saturdays, Joyce whined.

"Yes, you do and it is to be here promptly at 7 am. That's all ladies. You may leave."

Chapter22

Nervously, he thought about what he was going to do when he saw her get off of the plane. Was it going to be like other times, when his mind went into a slide show of her smiling at him, looking at him as if he were the center of her world, taking his hand into hers, walking with him as if they were two explorers who could

overcome any obstacle that was set in front of them. Or, was it going to be the small smile that upturned the edges of her mouth with strain. Was her body going to stiffen when she was close to him and was her hand going to tentatively pat his back as if the very feel of him was toxic? Waiting for the plane and thinking about how he'd phoned Zoe's house and been told that she was out. Nothing more: out. Hearing the humiliating pause, he'd asked if her mother would tell her that he'd called. The begrudging "yes" followed by the distinct click of receiver being replaced in its cradle.

The announcement came that the plane had landed. She carried one bag slung over her shoulder. She was standing upright in spite of the weight, keeping her posture and smiling at him. He moved to her instinctively, lifting the bag from her shoulder. He kissed her. She said, with a nervous tension in her voice, "It's good to see you."

They walked to his car together. He still wore his tie, although he had tugged the knot down to the center of his chest hours ago. Her leather jacket was form-fitting and her long skirt swayed beneath it and brushed against her ankles. The longing that he felt was deep, sad, and uncontrollable.

"Have you eaten?"

"I'm starving."

They drove to the Café Mozart in Union. They ate goulash and spaetzel and red cabbage. They drank German beer. He told her about the fire and about his students. She told him that she had learned to make paper. No, she never thought about acting anymore. Yes, she was seeing someone but he wasn't important. She was going to stay with her mother. No, her mother hadn't stopped drinking. Yes, she was thinking of coming back to New Jersey.

She didn't touch him as they spoke. Then she reached her fingertips across the table, slid them along his forearm and said, "If we can just stay friends long enough, who knows what might happen."

Chapter 23

Ron got to school early the next morning. Zoe wasn't in bed next to him, tempting him to stay just a little longer while she sucked or sketched or massaged some part of him. So, he got there with two containers of coffee over an hour before the official day was to begin. Sitting in his room, staring out the window over the fire escape, Ron drank coffee and watched the street. This part of the city, because of its tumult of large oak trees, was filled with squirrels. They scampered

along tree branches and over the sidewalks and between the cracks in stone walls. Ron sipped and watched their movements, almost ballet like, their senses tuned to the heartbeat of the day.

“Good morning, Ron” Sister Bernadette stood in his doorway, filling it with her large shoulders, her modified habit, her warm dark-eyed smile.

Ron turned towards her, pulled from the reverie of the street, missing the scent of Zoe on him, nervously puffed with the allusions to a future that Robin had suggested and said, “Good Morning Sister Bernadette.”

She waited in his doorway and then Ron invited her with an unopened container of coffee which, to his surprise, she accepted. “Are things better for you now? I mean, since the fire?”

Instantly, Ron saw and felt the flames dancing in back of his eyes. Waking up, feeling their heat, staring into it, pulling away and hollering Fire! “Yes Sister, I seem to be doing better.”

“The girls were all worried about you. You know, they care for you very much.”

“They are quite special aren’t they?”

“Yes, but,” she said smiling. “We are only here to witness how special they are.”

Ron felt genuine warmth emanate from her as she smiled for him. He found himself returning the smile and sharing something with her that cut through everything else. In that instant, he saw the two of them wanting only the best for these young people, willing to make an investment in their success, sadly dedicated to some invisible future of potential.

Driving without a license, and in the teeth-grinding grasp of an epileptic seizure, Alfredo Mora crashed the front of his car into the solid brick corner of their building. His head snapped forward and banged on the hard plastic steering wheel. Blood sprayed from his nose. He was chewing his tongue and drooling. His sister, Gina, was thrown against the passenger side door, screaming.

Alarmed dismay jumped like an electric arc between Bernadette and Ron and then they were on their feet and out the door, just in time to see the now stalled car roll back towards the street. Bernadette ran towards Gina and pulled the door open and gathered the girl into her strong and freshly laundered arms. Ron sprinted to the driver’s side. Alfredo was bent over the wheel but as the car rolled back so did he, mouth open, eyes fluttering, tongue lolling out of the corner of his mouth. Ron yanked the door open and slid his hands into Alfredo’s armpits, pulling him out of the car. He rested him down against the ground and then someone brought him

some kind of cloth and he propped it under Alfredo's neck. Bernadette ordered, "Put wood between his teeth, and make sure he doesn't swallow his tongue."

Ron reached into his mouth and tried to find the tongue. Teeth bit into the back of his hand, wincing fingers probing for the tongue, bringing his head up and bending his shoulders forward. Then Alfredo spit out a stream of bile and Ron saw that his tongue was sticking out as the phlegm slashed against him. The squirrels disappeared with the sound of the siren and as Ron held him up not thinking of what he should do next. People arrived and Ron was moved away.

The North Ward Citizens Group ran a private ambulance service and as soon as they got the call from the school, a detail had been dispatched. They had arrived within five minutes. Although they had the reputation of being a racist group, their ambulance served the neighborhood, irrespective of color. Founded by Anthony Imperiale, a loud-mouthed, ex-marine who extolled the value of all things Italian, the group had gained a sort of national attention during the Newark riots, when Tony's boys trained in Branch Brook Park and according to lots of rumors, did a lot more than train. All of the members were recruited personally by Imperiale and were, again according to rumor, at least half Italian.

Ron had once met Tony at one of his step-father's hangouts. He had been appalled when the gavonne had called Martin King "Martin Coon." His stepfather had grabbed Ron hard by the shoulder when Ron had said, "Now how does talking shit like that do anyone any good?"

Tony did not seem to recognize Ron as he and another man laid out a stretcher and lifted the still twitching Alfredo into the back of the ambulance. Then a patrol car arrived and Ron went back into the school and to the bathroom so that he could try to clean up and get ready for the day.

For the first time since he'd begin teaching, Ron was out the door with the bell. He drove back to the apartment and called Zoe. She was out. He left a message hearing the word Freedom sing in his ears. Then he dialed Robin.

Her mother answered the phone. Her voice was a bit shaky but had a lilt that bore some resemblance to the way that Robin spoke. "Yes, Ron, she is here. She's been antsy waiting to hear from you all day and now she has thrown herself onto the bed because I didn't give her the phone right away."

Ron could not picture this. It was at odds with the cool exterior view with which Robin presented to him these days, but the idea of it still made his heart flutter. Maybe it was true. Maybe his instincts about her had been correct. Maybe having a relationship with Zoe was gonna royally fuck up any chance that he and

Robin had of getting back together. Ron said, "Just ask her if she would like to drive down and pick her up now, if you could Mrs. Pavel."

Then Robin was on the phone and her voice had that cool soft lilt and Ron closed his eyes at the sound of it. "Are you coming down?"

"Where do you need to go?"

"I don't need to go anywhere. I thought that maybe we could just spend a little time together."

Ron flew down the parkway. His radio was blasting Deacon Blue. He wanted to be there instantly. He felt fit and a little edgy. He was pleased with his appearance. Maybe that would have an effect on her, but he doubted it. When he got to her mother's house, she said, "Would you mind taking me food shopping?" They wandered up and down the aisles of the supermarket, him pushing the cart, she holding a list. She said, "My mother is crazy."

"That's not news," said Ron before he thought about it.

She looked at him strangely and said, "So this teaching thing has really got you, huh?"

"It's special. I close the door and it's a different world and nothing except for what I do with them matters."

"Where are you going to live?"

"I don't know. Not anywhere expensive based on what they are paying me. But I did get a second job."

"Doing what?"

"Tutoring."

"Doesn't it feel as if it has you trapped a little?"

"Not so much as some other things," said Ron.

Then they unloaded the groceries and checked out. Working as they always did, without need for the "you do this and I'll do that" conversation. Anticipating each other, in control of an immediate goal, like a scene on a stage or the making of a meal, but no longer with the in and out intimacy of people who had sex.

In the car, she said, "Have you been going to Rahway?"

"Not so much, it's not like it used to be there either," said Ron. "I don't ever just go there."

She laughed. "Are you ever invited?"

Ron blushed. "Not so much, no."

In back of his eyes, he saw her and in his ears he heard her words. "You're not a real person, you know. You just made yourself up and it's all fantasy and acting."

Ron winced. He tried to blink the words and image away but he couldn't move it. He had believed her. Did he still believe her?

He extended his right hand and she took it. Her fingers against his palm, inclining her head and rubbing the backs of his fingers against her cheek, she said, "We've made such a mess of this."

Ron just gazed at her. Was it really possible that they had a future? He wanted to speak out but his voice wouldn't come. Her cheek was smooth and the touch of her fingers intoxicating. He felt himself slipping away and tried to hold on. He tried to hold on, but an image of her needing to be rid of him overtook his vision. He stared at Robin and thought she had tried so hard to be free of him. Did holding his hand feel like a defeat? Did sliding the backs of his fingers over the intimate smoothness of her face constitute surrender? Ron traced the line of her lips and she parted them ever so slightly. He thought of all the nights that she had slept naked next to him in her bed and not allowed him to touch her. Again, he thought of Zoe. And again he tried to push the image away. Zoe defenseless. Zoe vulnerable. Zoe in need of him. Robin's lips at the ends of his fingers. Tracing her lips. Entranced by the fire in her eyes. The stubborn fragility of her cheekbone.

Ron said, "I love teaching my students."

She didn't answer.

Chapter 24

Ron went through Friday as if he was in a fog. It surprised him and it frightened him. Nothing had distracted him from his students until now. Thoughts of Zoe never entered his head when he was teaching. The fire had distracted him but not when he was teaching. And now, in less than two days, Robin had him hearing her voice and seeing her face in back of his eyes almost non-stop.

He tried calling Zoe when he got back to his apartment. To his surprise she answered the phone. She almost squealed when she heard his voice. "I've been thinking about you almost non-stop," she said. "We have to get an answering machine."

"I've been thinking a lot about you too," said Ron, trying to tell himself that it was an obligatory thing to say. "When are you coming home?"

"I thought I would stay here through the holiday," said Zoe. "They make a big deal about it here."

At first it didn't register with Ron. What holiday? Did she mean Christmas that was a month away? Could she really mean that? Then it dawned on him.

Thanksgiving was this Thursday. She meant Thanksgiving! "Whatever you need to do," said Ron. "Are you running?"

"Yes, every day and riding my bicycle and swimming and feeling great except that I miss you so much. I want to be with you. I want to live in the country with you and make babies and raise chickens for the eggs and plant a garden." He didn't respond and there was a pause and then she asked, "Do you want to come up and pick me up like we used to and bring me back home and ravish me?" She lowered her voice when she said this last part.

"I really do," said Ron. "But I have this thing at my mother's house in preparation for the holiday and I have so much school work to do because it is a short week next week and I assigned all these essay tests that I want to grade and get back to the kids before the break."

She seemed crestfallen, and just said, "Oh."

The guilt spread through him like dysentery in a refugee camp. He felt himself begin to sweat and cramp. He wanted to get off the phone. He wanted to call Robin. Then he realized that the sound of her voice had given him an erection and he wanted to fuck her. But who was "her"?

"Look, suppose I drive up now and we take a ride somewhere and at least get to spend some time together."

Her voice instantly brightened again. She said "OK, when are you coming?"

"I just want to change my clothes," said Ron.

As soon as he hung him, he dialed Robin's number. She answered on the first ring and before he could give her the excuse that he had invented about having to do something at the school that night, she said, "Can we get together tomorrow? Some of my mother's friends are coming over and I promised her that I would spend a little time with her, but if you aren't busy, I would really like to see you tomorrow or maybe later tonight."

Almost involuntarily Ron found himself saying, "What time later?"

"Whatever works best for you. Drive down sometime after 10."

"That works," said Ron. "I have this thing tonight at school."

"You're going to be exhausted," she said. "Maybe we should wait until tomorrow."

"Why don't I call you when I'm done," said Ron.

There was that unmistakable lilting laughter that communicated to him that she knew that he wanted to see her and that she was pleased that he wanted to see her. Then she said, "No, I'm being selfish. Call me in the morning."

Ron wasn't sure if he was relieved or disappointed.

When Zoe got into the car she kissed him with incredible hunger. And then she whispered into his ear, "Please just take me home and rip off my clothes and do wicked things to me." Then she reached down below the steering wheel and opened his pants. She stroked him and then said coyly. "Will you leave it out all the way home?" A droplet of clear liquid oozed out of the head of his cock and she said, "You have missed me."

Chapter 25

The next morning, Ron drove down to see Robin. He had driven Zoe home about 11o'clock the night before and was exhausted by the time that he called Robin. They had agreed that he would drive down the next morning. But when he woke up, lying in his and Zoe's bed, Zoe not there but the scent of her lingering on their sheets and on his body and in his brain, he decided that it was time for the difficult conversation.

As he showered, he tried to formulate what he wanted to say. The question really was "why had she done that to him?" Why had she utterly destroyed him that way and left him feeling so empty and then continued to torment him? What had he done to her? The answer came to him with stunning clarity as the water sprayed over his face. He had refused to leave New Jersey with her. He had dumped their cats on her. He had slept with other women while they were together. He had refused to stop smoking pot and staying stoned most of the time. He had told her that he was less interested in being romantic than she was. He had let her work a full time job while he lived off this scam or that scam.

True, he had always paid for his share of things. True, they had agreed to have other people in their lives. True, he had joined her in Minneapolis when his assistantship was up. True that he was completely straight when he was with her out there. True that she knew that it was supposed to be a fresh start away from their families, away from their friends where the two of them could just create a life for each other. True that he was now much more romantic that she seemed to be.

Ron tried to juggle the competing truths. Were they a wash? Did it just mean that between them they had beat the shit out of whatever it was that they once had and that now it no longer existed?

He had never been deliberately cruel to her. That was the thing that he could not shake. She had set out to break him into little pieces and when he was broken, she had enjoyed seeing him try to piece himself back together. That was the real question. Why had she been so deliberately cruel? If they had any chance at anything, he needed to have that resolved in his head.

He would do it carefully. Robin had a way of reducing him, making him feel silly and stupid. He thought about how she did it. She used, he tried to think of a phrase, reductive simplicity! That was it! Ron smiled, pleased that he had come up with a way to put it into words.

Robin met him at the door. She looked radiant and for that moment all of his resolve vanished into her beautiful face, the smile that was there for him and only for him. The way that she took his hand and slid it around her waist, as she kissed him so gently and molded her body to him. Then she said, "My mother is sleeping, can we just make a break for it?"

Ron smiled and said, "I have an idea. Let's get in the car and drive to the ocean."

She was thrilled with the plan and said, "I'll get my camera."

As soon as they got into the car, Robin picked up the scent of another woman. Zoe didn't wear perfume. They hadn't made love in the car. Robin couldn't have said what it was that was informing her nostrils but it was there and it was unmistakable. She thought about Minneapolis and whether she could go back.

The ride down the shore was a straight shot down the Garden State Parkway. The road was almost deserted on this Saturday morning.

Robin said, "How was the dance?"

Ron laughed and said, "They love disco and those girls can sure dance. I wish I could dance that way."

"Did you dance with them?"

"No, they would have lost all respect for me if they had seen me dance, but I did wind up taking two of them home."

"Is that smart?"

"No, but it was late and their rides didn't show up."

That was the scent that she smelled. Robin relaxed. She was still very much in control with no competition about which to worry and then she shook her head to herself. "Competition for what?" she thought.

"Robin, I love seeing you. It feels so good to be spending some time with you but I have to ask you about something and I'm not sure that you want to talk about it."

"I don't want to sleep with you," she said automatically.

Ron stammered and felt flushed. Everything that he had been thinking disappeared from his mind like the lines of an etch-a-sketch that someone had shaken clean. "That wasn't what I was going to ask."

"Ok," she said, "what did you want to ask?"

"I don't know," said Ron, and fell silent.

Long moments passed. Ron drove and tried to reformulate his thoughts. How was he going to put it? Was she right? Was it that he was going to work the conversation around to wanting to sleep with her? He didn't think so. He thought about Zoe and their love-making last night. He thought about how she lay under him on her belly and squeezed her muscles like she wanted to suck the very life out of him through his cock. He thought about the way that he had such incredible control when he slept with her. They would fuck until she orgasmed and then he'd pull himself out of her and let her bring him off. He felt himself hardening.

"Do you want to eat?" said Robin.

They reached the shore town exit and pulled into an International House of Pancakes. The both were grinning. IHOP had been one of their favorite places to go for dinner when they were living together in Verona.

She had pancakes and he ordered an omelet. They emptied the bottomless pitcher of coffee and asked for more. She showed him her camera. They talked about how the ocean would look.

"I need to talk with you about Minneapolis," Ron blurted.

"What about it?" said Robin, putting her elbows on the table and bringing her hands, in fists now, up under her chin.

Ron tried to ease his way in. "Why do you want to leave?"

"No place is forever," said Robin.

Ron paused. He let that sink in. Maybe no relationship was forever either. He began again. "Why did things work out the way that they did?"

She met his eyes and said coolly, "Because you left."

Ron was flabbergasted. What could he possibly say to that? He fell silent and felt defeated. He felt himself drawing into himself, curling into a little ball inside of himself.

Then she said, "Let's go see the water."

They walked along the beach in a steady drizzle. The water was calm and the gulls were diving down and making small splashes as they fed. The beach was deserted and the white foam of the small waves licked the sand with the gentle

lapping of a soft tongue. Everything was shuttered closed and the breeze blew the rain into their faces. The summertime signs seemed old and lonely and forsaken. Ron wondered if they were like insects that had outlived their season and did not know enough to curl up and die.

Robin sensed the depression that passed over them. These were quiet moments that she no longer loved because they led to conversations that she was not ready to have, like the one over breakfast. Life should be bright and happy and filled with bounty and love. Regrets were just silly and more than that they were a trap from which she was determined to extricate herself. She thought to herself, "I can't fight his sadness. It's too strong and besides it is boring."

Then he seemed to brighten and said, "After the holiday I am diving right into Shakespeare, Macbeth with the seniors and Romeo and Juliet with the 9th graders."

She smiled and said, "That's quite a combination."

"When did you last read them?" he asked.

"Oh, I can't remember," she said dismissively. "I've been reading new stories. There is so much that is new that I really don't want to revisit things that are old. Maybe when I am 40 or 50 I will want to go back and look at them."

Chapter 26

On Sunday, Ron threw himself into his work. He lay across the mattresses and spread out papers and drank coffee and read. And then he was transported. He was back with his students and their essays embraced him like loving arms and he shared his feeling for them through his eyes and through his pen. He could picture each of them now as he read. He could see their faces and saw their hands crafting the essays as he walked up and down the aisles of his classroom.

Andrea wrote, "I can't say that I enjoyed these stories but I'm glad that I read them."

Donna wrote, "I feel stupid when I read this stuff because I never see the things in the stories that you do and I don't think that I ever will."

Lizette wrote, "These people were corny but not as corny as the Grendel story. I really hated that one."

Anita wrote, "It helped to have us tell the stories to each other. Maybe they were stories that were meant to be told instead of being read because it was really interesting to hear them but really boring to read them."

Judy wrote, "I don't agree with the Wife of Bath. I don't think that women wish to have dominion over men. I think they want men to treat them like people. I think they still want that."

Ron read the last one again with large smile on her face. She got it! That is what the literature is for. It is to help people to think about the world and themselves in the world.

Yvonne wrote, "I understand why they hated Jews, I hate them too." Ron groaned as he read that one. "They got what they deserved for killing Jesus."

Ron wondered if he had the right to address those kinds of prejudices. Was his goal to teach them about the language or to change the way that they thought. Well, the two did not have to be mutually exclusive Could he show her that he hated that attitude and not have her think that he hated her for having that attitude?

The phone rang and it was Zoe and she sounded vibrant and filled him with her electricity. "Are you working?"

"Yes, I've been at it for hours."

"Have you thought about me?"

"Yes."

He wondered if a woman really deserved to hear the truth when she asked a question like that. He hadn't thought of her once. He thought about Robin and their conversation and their plans for tomorrow evening. He had thought about his students. But he hadn't thought about her. Did that mean that he didn't love her?

"Do you want to see me?"

Ron winced. "I can't drive up there today Zoe, I really have too much work to get done before tomorrow."

Zoe giggled. "With my sisters at home there are plenty of cars around. I could just drive down to see you."

"That would be great," said Ron. "Why don't you leave in about an hour? That way I will be completely ready for a break when you get here."

When they hung up, he thought. "Zoe is like a wet dream and I thought of nothing but her until I got Robin's letter. And since Robin has been here, I haven't thought of her at all, except how to keep her a secret from Robin. But Robin doesn't make me happy and Zoe does. Does that mean that I don't want to be happy? Shouldn't I be thinking about the girl who does make me happy? But would that make me a real phony if I tried to tell myself what I should be thinking about? Too many questions without answers!" Ron tried to think about Zoe and automatically found himself squeezing his cock. He never touched himself when he thought about Robin. He wondered if that had always been true and what it meant if it was true. Then he turned back to the papers.

Rosa wrote, "All these people were greedy and their stories talk about how bad greed is. Did they know they were being bad when they were greedy?"

Una wrote, "I want to read stories that are true. Why are all the stories that we read made up?"

Ron wrote back to each of them like they were having a conversation. He knew that sometimes what he scrawled was illegible but they would just ask him what he had written and it would give him a chance to say what he had said to that particular girl to the whole class. Illegible handwriting could be a tool, it occurred to him. Unless they didn't ask what it meant. In that case they probably wouldn't have wanted to read what he had written anyway.

Chapter 27

That Monday Ron sensed a new feeling in his classes; it was the air of expectation. They had not had a holiday since school began and with the brief exception of Halloween, it had all been business and their teachers had driven them to start to create an atmosphere of hard work. No one had driven them harder than Ron, but he was probably the least aware of it. He was having fun. He was learning to teach and it never occurred to him one time that he was assigning pages each and every night and that they were writing on average two essays a week.

He was surprised when Irene Emanuel asked him to stop at her office and to bring his grade book with him. He had tried very hard to be neat with the book, but there had been a large number of transfers. Most of these had happened during the first weeks of class. Irene Emanuel had a keen ear and she had heard the girls talking about how much they loved his class. She had also questioned some of the older girls about what went on in his room.

"He works us like slaves, Sister, but he makes it seem like fun. I wind up doing twice as much work for him as I do for my other teachers, but it's not because I am afraid of him."

"Then why, Andrea, do you think it is that you work so hard for him?"

"I don't want to hurt him, Sister."

Irene Emanuel looked at her with some sense of surprise. "What do you mean?"

"When some of us didn't do our homework, he was hurt. We could see it on his face. It depressed him and made him sad. And we want to make him happy, because the class is so much fun when he is happy."

Irene Emanuel thought that either this man was a genius or the recipient of dumb luck to have stumbled into that situation. She had spent enough time talking with him to be pretty sure that he was no genius.

They sat together in her office and Ron handed her the grade book. She looked at it and hid the shock that she felt at seeing 20 graded entries for each student. She wondered what he was grading them on. She said, "The assignments are numbered, Mr. Tuck, how do you remember what the numbers represent?"

"At the back of the book Sister, there is a list of the assignments for each class with the numbers next to them."

She scanned the back of the book. She felt her mouth open when she saw how many of the assignments were essays. Ron searched her face while she scanned his book. He looked for some clue that would let him know if she was pleased with his work or if he was about to be fired. He couldn't take it if they were going to fire him. If he had to leave his students and be a failure to them, everything that he said to them would be lost. They would just be the words of some loser guy who claimed to know what was right but was just full of shit like everyone else.

"Mr. Tuck, I rarely say this, and I cannot actually remember having said it before, but you need to slow down. It's a long way until June and you do not wish to exhaust yourself and your students before you even get to the winter."

Ron breathed a sigh of relief. If he knew anything at all about the Catholics in general and these nuns in particular it was that they would never fire him for working too hard.

When he got home from school he changed his clothes quickly and was out the door before the call came from Zoe. She listened to the phone ring in the empty apartment and thought about just surprising him and driving down. After all it was her apartment too, even if she didn't pay any of the rent. Why did she feel that she always had to call first? But she let the phone ring and ring and then hung up and went into the bathroom so that she could vomit up her lunch before it turned to fat.

Robin looked very tense when she answered the door. Ron could see it immediately. "Is something wrong?"

She shook her head and her eyes got this faraway look in them. Her high cheekbones seemed more hollow than usual and she said the words while she stared at a closed door. "She locked herself in there and she has been drinking all morning. It reminds me of why it is so bad for me around here."

"It's because you are living with her," he said.

"That's part of it. I thought I would be staying with you and then I wouldn't have to see any of this."

Ron felt a freezing wash of guilt pass over him and she saw it too. She knew what it was. He was feeling the need to protect her. She didn't want him to protect her. She didn't want anyone to protect her.

They walked to the corner store and bought two containers of coffee and then they sat in his car and drank them. Ron tried to brighten the mood. He grinned his best dimpled grin and said, "Do you remember what our holidays used to be like?"

Robin sipped and smiled, and then she laughed. "They were awful, Ron. Between your father and mother and my father and mother and Rahway, we ate five meals and went home feeling sick and wanting to die."

Ron said, "And our mothers would time each of our visits to see who we spent more time with."

"That was your mother," said Robin. "God, how that woman hates me."

"She doesn't hate you as much as she was frightened by the way that I feel about you. She thought we were going to get married."

he thought pierced into Robin's brain instantly. There had been a time when she had thought so too. Before all the pot and before the arguments about how he made his money and before he had forced her to have Hank live with them. She supposed that she could still have him marry her, but then how would she ever see the world? Ron was staying in New Jersey. He was a local guy. He had limited expectations for what he believed was possible. He would tie her up and hold her back and eventually she would wind up knocked up, poor and living with a man who reminded her too much of her father. It was only one small step from that to her becoming her mother and that was not going to be her life! She felt her resolve grow stronger. Ron watched her face harden and wondered what he had done wrong.

Chapter 28

On Tuesday, Robin told Ron that she was going back to Minneapolis after the holiday. She told him on the phone. She didn't want to see his face when he heard the words, but she saw it in her mind's eye anyway. She asked him if there was anything special that he wanted to do with her before she left.

"When are you coming back?"

"I don't know."

"What about over Christmas?"

"That's too soon," she said. "I won't be able to afford it."

Ron blurted, "I don't want you to go."

"That's my home now Ron and besides you have a lot going on here. You have your students and you need to find a place to live. And I think I will be better off out there."

"What's so great about Minneapolis?"

"You thought it was beautiful when you were here. Maybe you'll come back and visit me again."

Ron felt himself freeze on the other end of the phone. Go back there! She really expected him to go back there? The last time it almost killed him to be there.

She heard the silence on the other end of the line. Then she said in a small voice, "What's so great about living here?"

"It's our home."

"It's your home." Now she wondered if she should have told him at all until the last minute. He would spend the next two days sulking about it and be no fun at all. Why couldn't he just learn to accept things as they were? Why did he always have to try to change everything until it was the way that he wanted it?

They drove into New York City. Ron told her that the school had given them an extra half day off. The rumor was that they wanted to save the money on heat but no one cared. At the end of the day on Tuesday, Irene Emanuel came on the loudspeaker and announced that Father Jones had decided that everyone could use the extra time as a reward for their hard work and so the girls could help their mothers prepare for the holiday feast. They were also reminded that there would be extra masses said on Thursday and that there was no better way of showing thanks and appreciation than to come to God's house to start the holiday.

The city was alive with traffic and holiday lights and an air of the frenzied festivities. Ron was pleased to see that the backstreet where he was always able to find a place to park was still relatively undiscovered. He side his Chevy neatly into a place and then they walked around the block to her old school.

Before she'd left for Minneapolis, Robin was on scholarship to an acting school. He had picked her up from school the four nights a week that classes were held and they had walked these streets together often and knew all of the cafes.

Ron thought that the West Village was nothing like the East Village. Things seemed cleaner and more expensive. They slid into a booth at a café on West 4th Street. They stared out the window and Robin remembered how much she loved

The City and how she would someday come back and live here. Then he began quoting lines from the Leonard Melfi play Birdbath.

It was a play that they had done on stage together. And the lines made her laugh and he was laughing too and then he took her hands and said, "I really don't want you to go."

He noticed that she didn't pull her hands back when she said, "I know."

He decided to plunge on. "Suppose we got married?"

Now she did pull her hands back. "Ron, we aren't even lovers anymore and besides, I'm seeing someone."

Ron face crumpled like a squashed carton. He lit a cigarette. His hands were shaking. The place seemed very hot and noisy. He looked at his reflection in the glass. He stared at the table. He tried to look anywhere but at her. He desperately wanted not to cry. Finally, he asked, "Do you love him?" She laughed lightheartedly. "I don't think so."

Then he got very quiet. All he could see was images of Robin and her faceless, nameless lover. She stood on her toes to kiss him. Her hands hurried his hips as they made love. Her special smiles were all reserved for him. It was for him that she brought home presents. It was to him that she told her secret thoughts. She told him how she counted in colors. She sang Broadway tunes for him. He could see her now. Her voice gentle and high as she sang, "I would die, I would die, I would strangle myself with my tie. If ever you said good-bye, then I'd die." He remembered when she has sung that for him and now he did wear a tie every day. Robin quietly kicked herself for the way that she had handled it. Why hadn't she seen it coming? Why had she told him that she was going back? Why had she ever mentioned Richard?

"Ron, don't you see how much baggage we have?" she asked quietly.

"I see but I don't understand why we can't make it different."

When he dropped her off, she leaned over and kissed him. It was a long and tender kiss. He felt her arms go around his neck and felt her breasts push against his chest and he tried hard not to over-react and so he didn't react at all.

"Will you call me tomorrow?" she asked.

"Sure," said Ron and then she was gone. He drove down towards Rahway and when he passed the house he saw that all the lights were on and that there were cars in the driveway. He slowed down but he didn't stop. He drove back up the parkway to his apartment and when he walked in the door the phone was ringing. It was Zoe.

Ron loved many things about Zoe but right now chief among them was that she never asked where he had been. He was there now and that was all that she seemed to care about.

"I can't wait till Friday," said Zoe. "I miss sleeping with you and drawing you and doing the things that we do."

"It's good that you're getting to see your sisters and your parents. How are things going up there?"

"Heidi really wants to meet you. She says that you sound neato."

"Neato," repeated Ron. "Well, tell Heidi that's the very first time that I have been told that I am neato. And what has your older sister had to say?"

"She just says to have fun with you and to be careful to not let you break my heart. But I don't care. You can break my heart if you need to break it."

All at once Ron felt tender and guilty. She was so incredibly vulnerable. She deserved at least some modicum of loyalty.

"On Saturday, can we go and pick out a stone?"

"Sure," said Ron. "Should we be stoned to pick out a stone?"

He waited for Zoe to laugh but she answered seriously. "I think it would help if we were. We would caress the surfaces with more sensitivity and feel if there were interior cracks or faults."

Ron smiled. Maybe this was the girl for him. Then she solidified the feeling saying softly, "I've been so horny. I'm wet all the time. I can't believe how much I have missed sleeping with you."

After the call, Ron looked through his albums. They had salvaged much more from his burnt out shell of an apartment than he thought would have been possible, and Zoe had brought down her stereo. He put an old Dylan album on the turntable and grinned to himself as he placed the needle in just the right spot. Dylan intoned, "If you're travelling in the North Country fair, where the winds hit heavy on the borderline. Remember me to the one who lives there. She once was a true love of mine."

Immediately tears sprang to his eyes. He needed to smoke a joint. He always needed more than one and so he rolled his customary 3 joints and lay back and listened to the songs roll over him. Then he shifted to Jackson Browne's first album and dropped the needle at the start of Jamaica. He lay his head back and thought, there they were in a nutshell. Robin the girl from the north county, and Zoe the beautiful Captain's daughter from Jamaica.

The taste of the pot was fine. He felt it swirl into him with a welcoming haze and the soft glow of the interior light that illuminated his brain when he was high. But

then “My Opening Farewell” found its way into his mind and he saw Robin standing in front of that open window. He wondered if it would be easier if he was the one who was going and not the one who had been left behind.

When he slept that night he had one of his two recurring dreams. He could almost feel himself groan in his sleep when the dream started. It was by far the one that scared him the most. In the other dream, he was waiting in a car and then he was shot and in a hospital bed while people gathered around him. He was not in pain in the dream but he could not move and then he felt himself getting better and stronger and would find himself in the car again waiting to be shot. That was the easier dream, but this one scared him so completely.

He was in the basement of his mother’s house. And he was digging up the concrete floor. He was digging up a body that he had buried there. The body was wrapped in plastic and he could not see who it was but the fear that rushed through him caused his heart to race and made him break out into a sweat in his sleep. He could not remember killing someone. But there was this body and he was sure that he had put it there and now he was trying to get it out before someone discovered it. He pounded on the concrete and felt it crack and then break into huge chunks. He swung the sledge hammer down hard and watched sparks and dust and small shards of stone break off. And then he could see the plastic and the sight woke him up.

He sat up shaking in the darkness. He could never really kill anyone, could he? The answer did not come from inside of him. Was the silence an indictment? Had he really done it and repressed it? Would he be found out as the murderer that he was and thrown into some dank hole and be forgotten? Had he really ended a life? No, he tried to scream to himself. He could not have done that, he would never do that.

Why would he bury the body there? Right in front of the washing machine and the dryer. How had he repaved the floor? George would surely have noticed. He would have been caught a long time ago if it had really happened. But he kept dreaming it and the dreams came at the most unexpected of times. A body wrapped in heavy plastic beneath a concrete floor in his mother’s basement and he was responsible for it being there. He was the only one who knew that it was there. Ron tried to tell himself that he read too much Edgar Allen Poe.

Chapter 29

Ron woke up and saw that there were still two and half joints left in the ashtray. Maybe he was slipping. The dream left him troubled as it always did. He made coffee and kept seeing glimpses of the floor in his head.

His phone was ringing.

"Ronald, this is your mother."

For a moment Ron was stunned. Had they found the body? Is that why she was calling? "Hi mom," he said almost shakily.

"Why aren't you working?"

"They gave us the half day off."

"I just had an interesting phone call. It was Robin. It seems that she thinks that you are living here."

A new fear gripped Ron. "What did you tell her?"

"I didn't tell her anything. Just that you weren't here."

"That's good," sighed Ron.

"I really don't want to see you mixed up with that girl again, Ronald. She isn't any good for you."

"I know Mom."

"And I really don't want to be involved in your lies."

"I know Mom."

"Your father was a liar and I thought that I had taught you better than that."

"You did Mom."

"Well it doesn't really seem that I did. Anyway, she asked that you call her."

"OK."

"Are you going to call her?"

"Yes," he said quietly.

"Why? she said. "So that she can break your heart again?"

"No Mom," he said with a slight tone of exasperation creeping into his voice.

"I always thought that you were so smart. Why do you have to be so stupid about this?"

Ron didn't say anything.

She went on. "But I suppose you are going to do whatever you want to do. You always have. You won't care how it hurts me or anyone else to see you the way that she makes you." Ron felt his head hang and he began pacing as he listened to her. "Well, I don't suppose that there is any chance that you would have the time to take your mother to the cemetery today."

"I really had plans, Mom."

“What, to mope around your apartment and sulk about Robin?”

Then a new thought seemed to strike her. “Where’s the other girl? The little mousey one.”

“She isn’t mousey.”

“When she squints through those glasses she is mousey.”

“She’s with her parents for the holiday. If you really need me to take you to the graves...” his voice trailed off.

“Oh no, I’m not about to beg you to go and see your grandmother and my mother and Uncle Mike and the Aunt that you professed to have so much love for.” She paused and then said. “How many times have you visited your Aunt’s grave?”

“I don’t know Mom.”

“When was the last time that you were there?”

“I don’t remember”

“Such a fine memory and he can’t remember the last time he went to the cemetery. I suppose it will be the same way with me, won’t it? You’ll never visit my grave”

Ron had had enough and then he said out of nowhere, “Do you think that there’s a body buried in the basement?”

“What!” he voice was incredulous. “What kind of a thing is that to say to a person? Do I think there’s a body buried in the basement? George will you listen to this?” she called out. “Ronald wants to know if we have a body buried in the basement.”

“Go and do whatever things that you have to do Ronald. What time will you be here tomorrow?”

“Whatever time you want me there, Mom.”

“You’re not bringing Robin are you?”

“No, Mom I’m not.”

When he hung up the phone, he called Robin immediately. She answered on the second ring.

“It’s Ron, my mom said that you called.”

“Yes, she was surely happy to hear my voice.”

Ron didn’t answer for a long time. “You know how our parents are. None of them, with the exception of my father, seems to like the one of us for the other.”

“That’s not really true Ron. My mom likes you very much.”

“Anyway,” said Ron. “What’s up?”

“Are you still mad about last night?”

"I wasn't mad," he said. "I was hurt. Why do you always think that I'm mad when you've hurt me?"

"I don't want to argue, Ron. I called to tell you that I'm going back on Saturday and I was wondering if you could take me to the airport?"

"I don't think I can. I have something that I promised to do with a friend."

She was silent. She was not at all used to Ron saying no to her. Then she said, "We're even going to lose our friendship because I won't fuck you aren't we?"

For the first time in Ron could not remember how long, he felt himself seething with anger at Robin. His hand gripped the phone tightly. "Yeah Robin, fucking you is what I'm all about."

"I didn't say that. But the truth is Ron, that if I were fucking you, you wouldn't be mad at all."

Ron's voice with almost a hiss when he spoke. "I asked you to marry me last night and we haven't made love in years now. And you still think that it's all about me sleeping with you? It doesn't matter what I say or do for you. You still think it's all about that."

Robin seemed to recoil on the phone. Ron could sense the look on her face. He could see the way that her jaw line squared. He could see the way that her forehead furrowed. He could sense the way she tilted her head so that her blond hair hung down over her face. "If it's going to be like this, we shouldn't see each other anymore."

Ron caught himself before he uttered the word "fine." He kept it locked inside of his brain. "Do you want me to drive down and pick you up?"

"Not if we are going to fight."

"We won't fight," he said.

"Then I would love to see you," she answered.

Ron drove down the parkway wondering why it was that he found himself so helpless around her. Was it because that she was the first woman that he really had loved? Was it because she was the first woman that really had hurt him? In fact she had devastated him. He had needed to have people put him back together and in some ways he felt that he would never be the same. He thought about a Fitzgerald essay. Was he like "a cracked plate" that had been glued back together and which people would never really trust because it could always fall apart? Was he so damaged that he would never again feel really whole? Was it like his knees? He remembered lying in the hospital bed after that first surgery and realizing that he would never be the same again. Was this like that? Were affairs of the heart

very much like what happened to damaged limbs? They could be put back together but they would never have that “full throated ease” or feel that unrestrained joy again.

He reached her mother’s apartment and stood at the door. He needed answers to these questions but he was pretty sure that the answers were not going to come from a conversation with Robin. They didn’t have those tender conversations any more. It was then that the realization hit him that he could not rely on her.

When she opened the door she put her arms around his neck and kissed him. It was a lover’s kiss. She molded her body to him and he swore that he could feel her hips moving against him. She said, “I didn’t think that you’d come.” Ron felt like a dog who had been given a treat. He wondered if he should wag his tail in the hopes of another. Robin felt his immediate reaction when she pressed against him. Feeling his hardness, she was reassured.

Chapter 30

Of all the holidays on the calendar Thanksgiving was his favorite. It was the only one that had not been tainted over the years by his changing beliefs. He had lost his feel for Christmas and Easter when he had started to question his Christianity. The Viet Nam war had cost him the 4th of July. He had never really loved Halloween or New Years. As far as Ron was concerned the year began in September anyway. Summer was the conclusion of the year. But Thanksgiving had always remained.

He liked the idea of being thankful. He loved the feast. He loved the football games. He loved the way that Marjorie had always respected the spirit of the holiday by inviting people to their house who had nowhere else to go. Aunt Dotty had taught him that Thanksgiving was a holiday that began in Massachusetts and that it always reminded her that she was actually a New England woman by birth.

That Thursday morning he showered and dressed happily. He wanted to call his father and wish him a good holiday, but that was another casualty of Viet Nam. When he started spouting his radical politics and Ron’s half brother and sister had begun to listen to his thoughts, Ron’s father had told him that he wasn’t welcome there anymore. That was the last real conversation that he and his Dad had. That had been over five years now.

“Happy Thanksgiving, Ronald,” said his mother. They kissed quickly. She had started setting the holiday table which started in the dining room and stretched

into their living room. George was galloping around the house setting up a bar. He looked excited but glum. "I don't know who you think is going to drink all that alcohol," said Marjorie.

George stopped what he was doing. "It's a holiday. People are allowed to have a drink on the holiday, Marge."

"I don't see why they need to," said Marjorie. She curled her lips and crinkled her nose and shook her head slightly as if she was throwing off a bad odor.

"Who all is coming?" said Ron.

"Reverend Cooly and his wife and Reverend Pascal and his friend," said Marjorie happily. "And of course your Aunt Mina. I asked the tenants upstairs, but they have someplace to go."

"Yeah," said George. "She wanted to take out an ad in the paper but the town already has a soup kitchen."

"Maybe you should start drinking now," said Marjorie. "At least then you'll be able to talk when the company gets here."

George shook his head. "What would I say to these people?"

"Of course, if it's not about cards, or booze, or crime, or the price of vegetables, what would you have to contribute? Why do you think I depend on Ronald so much? At least he knows how to carry on a conversation."

Ron tried to change the mood. "If they are anything like the nuns in the convent George, they'll go through quite a few bottles of everything."

George laughed and returned to his preparations.

Marjorie straightened and put her hand on her hip and gave Ron a look of betrayal. "They aren't Catholics who live all shut away from everything," she said. She paused and looked over at George and then back at Ron. "Can we please just have a nice dinner? Is that really too much to ask from the both of you?"

Ron moved into the kitchen. The aromas were outstanding. The roasting turkey filled the house and the oven made everything so warm that George had opened the windows. Ron loved having the windows open in a warm room on a cold day. It was extravagant but the feel of the breeze reminded him of warm weather. Chipper came over and wagged his tail and Ron crouched down to pet him. "I'm gonna take the dog for a walk," he said.

He leashed Chipper and they went out the back door and through the aluminum gate and down the street. Chipper never got taken for a walk unless Ron was there and the excitement of new smells and freedom gave him a prance to his step. They walked across Bloomfield Avenue and down to the glen, where Ron took the leash off and let Chipper roam. It was their secret that he did this. George would

have been horrified that he was going to get into trouble for having a dog off of a leash and Marjorie would have been worried that he was going to run away and get hit by a car again.

Ron talked to the dog as they walked. "It doesn't seem the same now that Aunt Dottie is gone, does it Chip?"

The dog stopped at the mention of her name. He raised his head and looked around for a few sad seconds and not seeing her, returned to his olfactory cornucopia. Ron smiled and then felt the dried leaves crunch under his feet like the spirits of the dead.

He wondered if there was an afterlife. The resounding no in his brain was painful. It was so much easier to think of his aunt and his grandmother someplace happy and beyond pain. He wondered if that was where the idea of a heaven came from. There had to be some reward for being good. Otherwise, why didn't people just spend their lives doing what they wanted to do? Wasn't that the whole purpose of hell, to keep people in line? It wasn't enough to say that a person would live on in the hearts of others. What kind of real comfort was that if there was nothing about it which a person could actually enjoy? They reached the end of the Glen and Ron leashed Chipper and started back across the street.

Ron held the leash so that it just slacked slightly across the dog's back, just enough for him to keep his pace and not feel the jerk of confinement. He loved Chipper. It was true that George had announced that it was his dog and then failed to housebreak him and slapped him in the mouth far too many times, so that Chipper had developed that self defensive urge to bite. But the one time that he had bitten Ron, he had with some strange instinct, crouched down on the floor and held his hand up to Chipper's mouth and said pleadingly, "no." That formed a strong pact. Chipper never bit him again and Ron never ever slapped the dog. They turned up the asphalt driveway and through the metal gate and the leash was off, Chipper romped for a few seconds and then came wagging up the backstairs and into the house.

Glimpsing down through the lower windows into the basement and flashed on how he had stayed down there with Chipper when George had taken to chaining the dog there because he could not stop him from urinating in the house. Ron would ask each night if Chipper was allowed out of the basement and George would say, "Not tonight." Ron would nod and take his plate from the table and walk downstairs to share his dinner with the dog and sit by him. This move, of course, had driven Marjorie totally insane and she would peck at George about her son eating in the basement until George would inevitably throw up his hands and say,

"Do whatever you want." They moved passed the pantry and up into the kitchen where Ron saw his father, sitting with Marjorie and George, having a holiday drink.

"Hello, Ronald," said his father with slick gentleness that did not withhold a hint of judgment.

Ron looked up and saw at once that his mother looked younger and sat with a fresh glass of cider in front of her and seems to be glowing. George was sitting back. Ron was not sure what George was seeing."Hello Dad."

Ron felt like he was instantly transported back to the age of fourteen or even younger, back to that time in his life when he worshipped his father and everything that his father did. His dad was now sitting in front of a cut crystal glass into which George had poured two fingers of Scotch over two ice cubes. He had also made himself one.

"Come and sit at the table, Ronald," said Marjorie. Ron felt himself moving and sitting. Chipper followed and sat by his side with a look of moral support. "Now, it's time for the two of you to stop your foolishness and just make up," said Marjorie.

Now the heat in the room was making Ron sweat, but he resented the way that his mother had put him on the spot and with of all people, his father. "What would you like us to make up, Mom?"

"There's no reason to be shitty," said Marjorie.

Ron met his father's blue eyes with a steady look from his own hazel eyes. He felt the fluttering inside that he always felt when he looked at his father. "It's good to see you Dad. I hope everything is going well."

"I hear that you have a job teaching," said Harry. And then unable to help himself, added "So I guess that you finally finished school."

Ron eyes flashed a look of defiance. "I may go back. You can never learn enough, you know."

Harry turned to Marjorie, "Twenty-five years old and still in school."

And then his eyes panned back to Ron. "You can't learn everything from books, Ronald."

"Thanks Dad."

"Now the two of you just stop it right now." Marjorie could see her plan swirling around the toilet bowl and just about ready to be flushed.

"How are Carol and Tim?" said Ron, referencing the two children that his father had from his second marriage, the two children that Ron had been told to stay away from.

"They are great. Timmy is playing basketball at Bloomfield High School and Carol graduated from East Orange Catholic last year and is learning to be a lab technician."

Ron smiled. "That's great Dad. Tell them that I said, hello." Ron stopped himself before he added something about unless you think it's too dangerous for them to hear my name mentioned.

"Why don't you tell then yourself?" said Harry.

"And just how am I supposed to do that, Dad?"

"You're welcome at the house anytime."

"Since when?" said Ron.

"I never said that you couldn't come there, Ron. I said that I didn't want you filling their heads with your crazy ideas." Ron knew that was a lie but it didn't matter to him.

"Yeah, I know. Thinking that the war was a tragedy and that Nixon was a monster were really crazy ideas. Almost as crazy as thinking that black people were people, huh Dad?"

"Do the two of you always have to be like this?" said Marjorie with desperation in her voice. She looked at Ron and pleaded with her eyes, tried to reach that place where he knew how important this was to her. But Ron was unreachable now. He and his father were locked into each other with a gaze that was unbreakable.

"If you had seen the things that I have seen, Ronald, you would understand why I feel the way that I do."

Ron knew that his father was in and out of some of the seediest bars in Newark New Jersey, a city whose very name struck fear into the minds of some suburban people. He had to admit, he had not seen the things that his father had seen. "Poverty and discrimination make people do very strange things Dad. It's not like everything became great when the Civil War was over, you know?"

"I'm not one of your students, Ron." said his father with a steely timbre in his voice.

"No Dad, my students are mostly Black and Hispanic."

"Bunch of animals," said George, trying to show solidarity with Harry.

Anger flashed across Ron's face. "You know what I have found George? The Hispanic families are very much like the Italian ones. They love their culture. They take care of their kids. They resent anyone who is not the same as they are and they like loud meals. And to top it all off they are Catholic."

George reddened. To his way of thinking he had just been called a spic. Harry could see this wasn't going the way that Marjorie had said that it would. "Well I

guess that I better get going. Ronald, you are welcome to come over whenever you want. Carol and Tim would love to see you."

"Really?" said Ron. "Where do they think I've been?"

Harry didn't answer but stood and put on his coat. Marjorie automatically stood up to. So did George. Ron sat there. He really didn't want his father to go, but what could he do about it now?

Marjorie walked Harry to the door and when she came back her face was set into a hard mask. She walked into the kitchen where Ron was petting Chipper and waiting for what he knew was coming. "Why are you such a bastard?"

Ron didn't answer.

"Your father is a proud man. Do you think that it was easy for him to come here and apologize to you?"

"Did I miss the apology?"

"Him coming here was an apology. He knows that he's made some mistakes. But he is a good man and he is your father!"

"Makes you wonder about nature and nurture doesn't it?"

"I'm not as smart as you are, you little bastard, so I guess I'm going to have to ask you to explain that to me."

"What it means is, Mom, can you imagine what it would have been like if he had stuck around to raise me?"

Marjorie was taken aback. That was not what she had expected him to say. Harry would have been very hard on Ron and she knew how free he was with his hands. She regretted a lot of things about her failed marriage with Harry, but seeing Ron and then trying to imagine how he would have turned out with even more of Harry's influence on him was not one of them, even if he did need a good clout in the head once in a while. She knew that Harry would have been jealous of his brain.

Chapter 31

Dinner was sumptuous. It began with an antipasto. There were paper thin slices of prosciutto wrapped around small pieces of fresh melon that George had ordered from Florida. There were black and green olives and a bowl of cold shrimp. There was wet mozzarella and Swiss cheese and artichoke hearts and cold red beets. But before they began to eat, Marjorie asked Reverend Cooley to say grace. The Coolys and the Pascals had recently returned from Africa. Reverend Cooley was a tall man who was totally bald on the top of his head but sported slicked back sides with his remaining hair. He wore silver framed glasses and Ron noticed that he had very large hands when everyone bowed their heads to pray. His wife had curly hair

that was kept short. Ron thought that it looked like a bird's nest on top of her head. Reverend Cooley wore a brown and orange plaid sports jacket that looked festive in a garish sort of way. His wife, who was only introduced as Mrs. Cooley had a patient smile glued to her face and Ron noticed that it never left. He thought that it was the kind of smile that could be described as long suffering.

Dominick Pascal was a big man, which is a polite way of saying that he was obese. Ron counted three chins. His wife Sela was very thin. Dominick was wearing a blue suit with a little American flag lapel pin that Ron noticed immediately. He wished that he had an American flag shirt and that he had worn it to piss them off. It occurred to Ron somewhere early in the meal that these people did not particularly like Marjorie and George and that they were there as an act of Christian brotherhood. It was something about the way that they pronounced "antipasto" and keep remarking on how unusual it was to start a Thanksgiving meal with such an exotic dish.

Marjorie was oblivious to it all. She wanted to know about what it was like in Africa. "I can tell you this Marjorie, you would never get such a fine meal as this anywhere in Africa."

Ron looked up. "Really? You were over the entire continent?"

"Quite a bit of it," said Dominick. "Quite a bit of it over the last six years."

"What was it like in Egypt?" said Ron.

"We were never really up North" said Dominick. "Egypt and Africa are really two different places."

"They are?" said Ron.

Rev. Cooley said, "Mr. Pascal is speaking culturally rather than geographically, Ron."

Ron nodded. "So except for Egypt then is it really all the same?"

"Oh no! There are widespread differences," said Cooley.

Mrs. Cooley added, "Some of the coastal states like South Africa are truly beautiful."

Ron shot her a glance. "Too bad about Steve Bilko then wasn't it?"

George laughed heartily, now on his 3rd Manhattan and said, "Now there was a really funny man. Was his name really Bilko?"

"Do you mean Phil Silvers?" said Dominick.

"Steve Bilko just had his brains beaten out for wanting the freedom to organize the true people of South Africa," said Ron. "He was in prison and they beat him on his head until he was dead."

"That poor man," said Mrs. Cooley.

George reddened and drank. Marjorie got up and cleared the dishes for the next course. Ron got up to help her. In the kitchen she whispered to Ron, "Please be nice. Please do this for me."

Ron nodded and said that he would try.

The next course featured the roasted turkey and the stuffing that Marjorie had made for the first time outside of the bird. There was a bowl of creamed pearl onions and a long dish of candied yams. There was a large bowl of yellow turnip. Then Marjorie walked out with two more bowls. One held string beans and the other was filed with broccoli. This year they were also having fresh cranberry sauce, something that Ron had never tasted before. The table filled up under the growing eyes of those seated around it. Ron could have sworn that he actually saw Dominick lick his lips. He was proud of the table that his mother and George set. George was actually an excellent carver of meat and so the turkey's carcass was neatly stripped. Ron thought for a moment about the way that he had hacked up a bird in the past and wound up actually pulled the legs and wings off with his hands and exposed ripped out pieces that made it look as if some predator had attacked the game with its jaws and claws.

Reverend Cooley said, "Well this is a magnificent looking table."

The guests all looked from one to the other smiling and nodding their heads. There was a respectful moment of quiet and then the murmurs of "Oh yes, I would love some of that" that came as the plates were passed around the table. As they began to settle down to their plates and eat, Cooley said, "Your mother tells me that you are a teacher, Ron."

Ron finished chewing and swallowed and said, "This is my first year at it. I hope to be a good teacher."

"Lord willing, I'm sure that you will be," said Cooley. "What did you do previously?"

"I spent some time in a jail in Paterson and before that in a center for the mentally ill in Cranford," said Ron. He was instantly sorry that he had mentioned the jail. He saw the look of pain wash across Marjorie's face. He knew that it made her think about her long searched for, and never found, father.

"Some of our greatest minds have spent time in both of those places, Ronald. No reason to be ashamed," said Mrs. Cooley. It caused Ron to grin.

"I don't think that the young man meant that he was incarcerated in either of those places, Mother," said Reverend Cooley. "I think that he was telling us that he worked there."

Mrs. Cooley bit her lip and said, "Oh I am sorry," and momentarily put down her knife and fork. Ron saw Marjorie glare at the woman. He wondered what his Aunt Dotty would have said if she had been here. "Please do forgive me, Ronald."

"No offense taken, Mrs..." Ron paused and feigned a look of confusion. "What is your first name?"

The Cooleys exchanged a look of quick tension. And the Reverend Colley said pointedly, "Mrs. Cooley's Christian name is Gladys."

Ron ignored the signal. "No offense taken, Gladys."

The Cooleys exchanged the look again. George asked if anyone wanted more wine or cider. Dominick was hunched over his plate and seemed to be shoveling the food into his mouth with the precision of a back hoe. Sela Pascal picked at her food demurely, occasionally deigning to lift a half filled fork to her mouth and tentatively placing it to her lips before opening the cavity just the slightest bit to place it inside. She then chewed thoroughly and touched her napkin to her violated lips just after she swallowed.

"What do you teach, Ronald?"

"English," said Ron.

"So you are a man of letters," said Gladys Cooley.

"Rather than numbers, yes," said Ron.

"What do you do for a living, Mr. Bombasco?" said Reverend Cooley.

George had a large helping of turkey in his mouth and held up his hand while he chewed, asking her to wait. Hurriedly he chewed and swallowed and then blurted, "I'm a printer."

"What is it that your company prints, George?" said Dominick, raising his head up for the first time, his face grown red and his cheeks swollen from exertion.

"Local papers and the Foodtown circular," said George, happy to be on firm footing. He did a man's job and he did it well. It was a time honored profession. He didn't spend his time in bars with games or in classrooms with little girls.

"What do you do, Dominick?" said Ron.

"Sela and I have dedicated ourselves to spreading the word of God."

Ron nodded. "Does it pay well?"

An electric look of tension passed around the table at the impudence of the question. Reverend Cooley spoke. "The rewards are manifest, Ronald."

Ron had just done some reading about the ways that Missionaries had helped to rape Hawaii. He knew that his mother had wanted to be a missionary when she was young. He also knew that for her it had been a deep and sincere desire to make the world like the world she envisioned that Jesus would have wanted.

"How do you do that in 1977?" said Ron. He shrugged. "I mean, I imagine that everyone has heard about it by now."

"Many are they that listen and do not hear," pronounced Cooley.

People were now reaching out for additional food, all except for Sela whose plate was still more than half full. Ron took additional dressing and ladled some of the surprisingly good fresh cranberry sauce onto his plate. Marjorie took additional candied yams. Dominick went for a refill of everything. Even the Cooleys took more turkey and potatoes.

"What I mean is," said Ron, "what exactly do you do?"

"Well, with all of the European countries giving up and all this talk of individual States and Countries, there is a movement back to old heathen ways in Africa and we try to combat that."

"And how do you do that?" said Ron. He found himself now genuinely interested.

"For one, we work on old legends and songs, the things that these people believe because they really don't know any better. We sometimes take the melodies of old songs and rewrite the stories, providing an enlightened look at the world."

"You change their history?" said Ron.

"They really don't know too much about history, Ronald."

"How do you know that?"

Cooley seemed to ignore the question. "They have folk songs and tales that they tell each other. And we inject the Divine presence into them."

Ron put down his fork. "So basically you steal their history the same way that slave owners stole the language of African slaves in America."

"We don't think of it as stealing, more that we are giving them gifts."

"Suppose they don't want your gifts?"

"We also provide food and clothing and medicine."

"Well, that's good," said Ron. "Do they get the medicine if they don't sing the songs the way that you want them to?"

"Marjorie, I must say that this is the most delicious meal that we have had since returning home," said Gladys Cooley.

After the pies and the coffee and the fruit and the nuts, the men went to watch a football game and the women congregated in the kitchen.

Ron saw that the Miami Dolphins were drubbing the St Louis Cardinals. He had always rooted for the Cardinals because he liked their quarterback, but Miami was just too good and the game was not competitive.

Football didn't live in him the way that it used to. He knew that he would never play again, not even in a game of two-handed touch. The men were sprawled with their bellies sticking up like large amphibious creatures sunning themselves in front of the light of the TV instead of being on some rocks watching the sea roll in.

He looked to the kitchen. There was a constant clatter of pots, pans and dishes as the women honored a time old custom of not leaving each other with a mess to clean. Ron would have preferred being in there, but he knew that his presence would ruin Marjorie's being the center of attention. They would all feel compelled to make a fuss over him being there,

or in the cases of these other two women perhaps express their discomfort with him not acting like one of the men.

Chapter 32

Moths fly to the light and batter themselves against the glass that keeps them away. Flowers stay open to the sun, oblivious as to whether or not it is burning them. Ron wondered if he was like those things as he drove down the parkway. His plan was to pick up Robin and ask her if she wanted to go to Rahway for the traditional Thanksgiving gathering. He had called Zoe, but her family had not yet had dinner and she was sure that it would be at least midday on Friday before she would be able to get out of there. She was excited that he had called her at home. "I've been thinking about it and I know now more than ever before that I love you, Ron. I think about you all the time and I have been drawing you from memory. I know that I want to have babies with you."

Ron blushed on the other end of the line. He did not tell her that he loved her just then. He had never told her that he loved her. He had never told her that he wanted to have babies with her. Robin had always made it clear that she didn't want children and this had appealed to Ron. He thought that world should learn how to take care of the people that were already here before creating a bunch of new ones. He didn't need the trophy babies to assure himself. He'd told Robin that he would call her the next day and drive up to get her.

He wanted to sit in front of the fire in the living room at Rahway and talk. He wanted to feel Robin sitting next to him and to talk to her afterwards about what people had said and get her perspective. He loved Rahway. He loved it, as much as he loved Robin, she would have said that he loved it more. But both Robin and Rahway had rejected him and there he was trying to crawl back like a dog that had been kicked away from the fire. He wanted to know what he could do so. That he

wasn't rejected. He wanted to be who they wanted him to be so that they would love him as much as he loved them.

Sure they just would have said that he was supposed to be himself. Ron laughed out loud in the empty car at this thought. People were always telling him to be himself, except that when he was himself, they always sent him away. It occurred to Ron just then that he was probably more himself with his students than he was with anyone else. They didn't send him away. They embraced him. They wanted more and more of him. Sometimes they wanted too much of him, like when they asked him if he ever tried LSD or Marijuana. Ron had given them the evasive answer, "I always wanted to be in control of myself." And part of that was true. It was what he disliked about tripping. But he didn't feel that he lost control when he smoked pot. He felt that it helped to focus him. To bring him to that zoned in place where nothing distracted him from what was right in front of him.

"Why on earth would you possibly want to go there?" said Robin. She was looking at him with an incredulous smirk on her face. "Did they invite us to go there?"

"It's a standing invitation," said Ron. "Thanksgiving night at Rahway. A lot of people will just show up. Warren and Laureen expect it."

"They aren't expecting you and me, Ron. I guarantee you that."

Ron felt himself slump.

"Maybe you should just go, if that's what you really want to do."

Ron felt that she was testing him. That phrase, "if that's what you really want to do" was one that he'd heard before. If he said yes, she would feel that he was choosing them over her again. If he said no, she would think that he was still weak and that she could manipulate him anyway that she wanted to pull or push him. It had been a bad idea and now he was stuck with it. "I thought that maybe you'd enjoy seeing some of those people," said Ron. "We haven't really seen anyone since you came home. But maybe you'd rather go to a movie."

They went to see Annie Hall. Robin had thought that a good comedy would be just the right thing. Ron had not particularly liked Woody Allen and thought that it was going to be a silly, slapstick kind of story, but he agreed. He sat there fighting back tears through almost the entire film. It was a story about Robin and him. Is this why she had wanted to go to see it? The theater was dark and crowded and she held his hand as they watched. Once she had looked at him and saw the tears rolling down his face and quickly looked away. It was sad in a silly kind of way, she thought. When the story came to the part where Woody rewrote the ending of their relationship, Robin wondered if Ron would do that with her. But he never

talked about his writing anymore. It was like he had left that part of him. He was no longer the young and aspiring poet that would get up in front of crowds and read his material. Had she done that to him? Had she taken that away from him? More than likely it was all the pot that he had smoked that had done it. She wasn't going to be blamed for that too.

Ron made sure that his face was dry by the time the houselights came up and they walked out of the movie house. "If you'd like to go to Rahway we can," she said.

"No," said Ron. "You were right. We didn't have an invitation. It was an old idea."

He was very quiet. They got into the car and waited as the de-icer cleared one of the early nighttime frosts from the windshield. He lit a cigarette. She had stopped smoking. People were lining up to see the 10 o'clock show. Ron looked at the couples and wondered if they knew that they were doomed. They didn't kiss goodnight. They hugged.

"My father is going to take me to the airport," she said.

"I'm sorry that I couldn't help you," said Ron, "but I had this commitment."

"You don't need to explain," said Robin. She walked off thinking that she hated it when he got morose.

Chapter 33

Ron drove up to fetch Zoe from her house about noon the next day. This time she did not come bounding out as he pulled up. He turned the car off and walked up to the door. When he rang the bell, Zoe's mother answered.

Donna Savron was a short woman with shoulder length brown hair. She was round and full and had a sense of the voluptuous about her. She did not smile as she extended her hand towards Ron and said, "Well, it's nice to finally get to meet you. Usually Zoe just runs out of the house. She sits here by the window and watches for your car and then she is gone. We have been wondering if there was something so strange about you that she doesn't want to give us the chance to get a look at you."

Ron didn't know what to say to that. He took her hand and found it warm and dry. He looked down at it and saw traces of paint smeared on her fingers. He smiled into her face and said, "I hope that you had a good holiday."

The woman seemed surprised at the comment and took a step back. She turned to the side so that Ron could see the room. "Come in for a few moments, Ron. I'd like you to meet my husband."

Paul Savron was seated in an easy chair in his study. The TV was not playing. Dark framed glasses were laying closed on top of a book that was resting in his lap. Ron tried to get a look at the title. He read ETHICAL PERSPECTIVES ON BUSINESS AND SOCIETY and immediately lost interest. He stuck out his hand and said, "Ron Tuck, nice to meet you."

Savron looked at his hand and then up to Ron's face. It seemed to Ron that he took his hand reluctantly and shook it. Ron thought that he had felt cold and a bit weak. "Glad to finally meet you," said Savron.

Ron thought that both of them said that with a hint of accusation in their voices. He wondered where Zoe was. It wasn't like her to keep him waiting like this. "What is it that you do for a living Ron?"

"I'm a teacher," said Ron.

"Yes," said Savron. He nodded his white haired head slowly. "In a Catholic girls' school, isn't that right?"

"Yes," said Ron.

"In Newark, isn't that right?"

"Yes," said Ron.

"Is that what you intend to do?" said Savron.

"I'm not sure what you mean," Ron answered.

It was then that Zoe burst into the room. She did not run to Ron and put her arms around him. She stayed in the doorway smiling and nervous. She looked between her father and Ron.

"Come in Zoe," said Savron. Ron felt like he was giving her permission to enter the room and that she had been standing there waiting for it. "Ron and I have just been getting to know each other."

"What is it that you do Paul?" said Ron.

Ron watched as Savron absorbed the question. Then, still without answering he looked at Zoe. With his eyes still on his daughter, he said "I'm an account executive for Standard Brands."

Ron crossed the room to Zoe and took her into his arms and kissed her. Zoe molded her body into him for the kiss and then seemed to stiffen and pull back.

"I was on the phone with Laureen," she said. "They want us to go down there for dinner tonight."

In the car, when they got into the corner, Zoe reached over and put her hand between his legs. She squeezed him with one hand and she waved goodbye to the house with the other. Ron could see her smiling and her sisters waving down from one of the upstairs rooms. They were waving and smiling too.

Zoe said, "I thought you handled that really well."

"Handled what?" said Ron.

"My father," said Zoe.

"I was only there for a few minutes," Ron said.

"Wasn't that enough?" she answered.

Her fingers were caressing between his legs and he was as hard as heated wood. "You better stop that or it's gonna happen right in my pants, sad Ron. "I'm really horny."

Zoe giggled. "I'm glad that you are. I'd be worried if you weren't."

"They do know that we are living together, don't they?" said Ron.

"My mother does."

"What about your father?"

"We haven't talked about it."

Ron looked at her and did not understand. "What do you mean? Where does he think that you sleep at night?"

"We haven't talked about it," she said again and shrugged. "I suppose my mom has told him."

When they got back to their apartment, Zoe knelt down and undid his belt, but instead of unzipping his pants, she pulled the belt from around his waist. "I want you to punish me for running away so that I learn to not do it again," she said. The she turned on all fours unbuttoned her jeans and slid them down to her thighs and held up her bare ass for him and waited.

Ron wasn't sure that he wanted to whip her with his belt. But there she was and she was waiting. It was what she expected of him. She folded her hands over the back of her head and said, "Please don't hurt me too much."

Chapter 34

Zoe was having trouble sitting as they drove down to Rahway. Ron was smiling. That afternoon, between their repeated sessions of frenzied love-making,

he told her that Robin has been back for a visit. She became frightened. "Did she take you to bed with her?"

"No."

"Did she ask you to?"

"No," said Ron. "She's seeing someone."

"Would you have fucked her?"

"I don't think so."

"I would have understood," said Zoe. "I know how much you love her."

"How do you know that?" Ron was more than amazed at her reaction. He was expecting tears and recriminations. He was almost unable to believe her reaction.

"Ron, I knew that she was coming. That's why I ran away."

Ron wanted to ask how she knew, but something inside of him said that he was better off to just let it go and for the first time that he could remember, he did. Zoe was squirming on the seat next to him but he could tell that she was happy. She had her sketch pad and her pastels with her. She told him that she was looking forward to a chance to do some drawings of Rahway.

The house was brightly lit. Cars filled the gravel driveway and Ron had to back out again and park on the street, so that he didn't block anyone in. They went up the drive and to the back door. The bells over the door jingled as they entered. Neil Diamond's Longfellow Serenade was playing on the stereo. They walked into the kitchen and there was Kelly, a very pretty girl with impossibly long red hair. It hung straight and meticulously manicured down to her waist. Ron knew her well. They had been Warren's students together. Kelly hadn't liked him since he had dumped one of her girlfriends and the girl, despondent over Ron being the first man to fuck her, had tried to kill herself. Ron always felt tense around Kelly but he smiled and said, "Hi Kelly. I'd like you to meet Zoe."

Zoe stood there in her jeans holding her pad and pastels and Kelly looked over at her without really acknowledging Ron and said, "Hi. I'm just trying to figure out how this over works. I've never seen one this old before."

Zoe put her things down on the counter and said, "Let me help." And then the two of them were kneeling down and looking inside and turning knobs. Ron stared for an instant at the way that Kelly's hair and Zoe's hair intertwined and then he walked down the single step into the living room. The white washed fireplace was blazing and pine branches had been laid across the top of the split flue mantle. There were six people seated on cushions drawn up

close to the flames in a semi-circle, all turned in and facing the burning wood. All of their heads seemed to swivel at the same time.

Warren called out, "Hey Ron, how are you?" in his unmistakable drawl.

Laureen's eyes flashed dark in the flames when she saw him. "Hi Ron, happy holidays."

Julian T. Willy said with his unmistakable sarcasm. "Well, now the evening will surely get more interesting."

April's smile was soft and radiant and she stood when she saw Ron and came to him and hugged him to her. "It's been such a long time since I've seen you. It's really good to see you."

Ron embraced her with delight and surprise. He held her at arm's length and said. "You look great April. It's good to see you as well."

"Come sit by the fire," said Warren. "We have just been talking about the year gone by."

"Did you bring Chris, or is someone else marching in your bimbo parade these days?" said Julian, who was now openly gay and never passed up a chance to make some sexual reference to Ron and Chris's friendship.

Laureen laughed and said, "Julian, make some attempt to be civil."

Julian, with a flourish threw his scarf around his neck and over his shoulder, "What? I can't have fun with the entertainment? Please tell me that it is why you invited him, Warren and that it was not some misplaced notion of a contribution to the conversation other than that of comic relief."

Laureen laughed again and said, "Julian you are so funny when you are drunk."

"Zoe is in the kitchen with Kelly," he said.

"The boardwalk portrait painter?" said Julian.

Laureen slapped him playfully and stood up to go and greet Zoe in the kitchen.

Ron sat down cross-legged opposite Warren and Julian. April curled in next to him. "No," said Ron. "I didn't bring Chris, but I have his number if you want to give him a call and see if he still loves you, Julian."

"Be nice," said Warren. "Now, you were about to tell us what you thought was the most important thing that happened this year, Julian"

"The most intriguing event of the year has been the death of Nadezhda Kashina" said Julian.

Ron had no idea who he was talking about. Warren and April seemed to know. "Who is that?"

"Someone far beyond your ability to comprehend," said Julian.

Warren drawled, "And what event has your imagination Ron?"

Ron thought that Warren had no idea who he was anymore but played the I'm current on Events of the Day game "I'd say that it was what Sadat has done," said Ron.

Warren smiled. "I thought that you would have said Carter's pardon."

"I think it's been a dull year," said April.

Kelly and Zoe and Laureen walked into the living room and announced that the oven was hopeless, but that they had things under control. Warren asked if they wanted him to take a look at it, but Kelly assured him that it was fine and sat between his legs and kissed him. Zoe put her hands on Ron's shoulders and then knelt alongside of him to avoid sitting on the wooden floor. Everyone said hello to Zoe. Ron was tense and thought that if Julian made one insulting crack about her that he could easily strangle him in his scarf.

"For me," said Warren, "the death of Gary Gilmore is symbolic. It displays an entirely new level of marketing death that is dangerous for our culture."

"As if we weren't already marketing death," said Ron.

"The work of Vicente Aleixandre," said Laureen.

"You really do like him, don't you?" said Warren.

"He's amazing," said Laureen.

Again, Ron did not know who they were talking about. He would ask Laureen about him later, outside of Julian's earshot.

"What do you think is the most significant event this year, Kelly?"

Kelly moved her head from side to side to make her incredible long hair shimmer and then she said smiling, "Being with you."

Everyone laughed and Kelly blushed. Warren reached over her shoulder and squeezed her right breast. "That's deflecting the question."

"Warren, you fool, the woman just said that she loved you. Take it with a simple smile and treat her well," said Laureen.

Everyone laughed again and Kelly slid down to rest her head on Warren's lap. Then Warren turned his gaze on Zoe. "And what would be your answer?"

"The light reflecting off of a lake that I saw in New York State. The way that the colors blended into the water and made it seem like a large diamond."

"Costume jewelry," said Julian.

"What was it really for you Julian, the bath houses?" asked Ron.

Julian stiffened. "I go to the bath houses as a political statement."

Laureen laughed. "Not at all for all the naked bodies, I know."

Ron stared at the fire. He hadn't done it when he had first walked into the room. The immediacy and emotional reaction to the people there had held his attention. But now the fire was reaching for him again and he was giving himself to it. The flames waved to him like another old friend. The fire smiled at him. In a wicked kind of way, the fire laughed at him. Ron held the gaze of the flames. The sounds of the people's voices faded. The fire wanted to talk to him, to tell him something, but he had to blot out the distractions first. He was being pulled closer to the flames; he felt the heat on his face. The fire was chanting. "Mine, mine."

He felt Zoe take his hand and squeeze it but he didn't respond. He wanted to dance with the fire. He wanted to help the fire claim what she owned. And then there was Zoe's voice in his ear. "Ron, are you alright?"

He looked away from the flames and into her face. She was staring at him and brushing his hair with her fingers. The rest of the people in the room were looking at him. He looked back into Zoe's face and the fire was dancing on her glasses waving to him and laughing. Ron tried to laugh but it came out like a grunt. "I guess I just zoned out there for a little while."

Julian's eyes were filled with glee. Kelly was staring at him with a distant curiosity. April hadn't looked at him since Zoe had come into the room. Warren drew in on his pipe and Ron saw the embers glow.

Laureen laughed and said, "I asked you if you had seen Robin."

"Oh," said Ron. "Yes, I saw her. She's doing well. She's learning to make paper."

At dinner, Warren returned to the earlier topics. He wanted his guests to think about what they had chosen as significant events from the perspective of whether those events were going to change the lives of the people seated around the oval shaped, oak table. He looked at each one of them. In his opinion, only Kelly and Zoe had brought up events that were truly significant. Of course he did not mention his references to Gary Gilmore, but he was getting to it. "What I'm working at here," said Warren, "is to come to an understanding of why this avant garde painter or this Nobel Prize winning author are important to you personally. What significance will the Sadat visit really have? I can understand why someone would think that a relationship is important. Or why someone would think that a particular experience was important." He gave Zoe a smile of acknowledgement. "But why these other things?"

Laureen giggled again. "Of course Warren is conveniently leaving out his personal interest in Gary Gilmore."

“Not at all,” said Lashly pointedly. “My interest is in the way that the culture responded to the execution. I’m trying to discover why this is a culture that has found itself distracted by the macabre. And that is of some importance to me, both personally and as a member of the culture.”

Julian T. Willy stood. “Well on that happy note, I do think that I will be going.” The announcement startled the table. They were in the middle of the meal.

Laureen and Kelly both said, “Julian stay,” in a harmony that if no one knew better would have sounded rehearsed and almost like the chorus of a song. But Julian was on his feet. He kissed Laureen and Kelly on the cheek. Thanked Warren for inviting him over.

But Lashly wasn’t ready to see him go. “I can understand you feeling uncomfortable with this conversation, Julian. But it’s not going where you think that it is.”

Julian smiled and brought his heels together with an audible click. He looked down at Warren and said, “What I think is that I graduated from college some time ago.”

“I don’t think that you really want to leave,” said Warren.

Julian walked in long, stiff legged strides to the door with his arms held straight down and immobile. Putting on his jacket and saying, “Ho, ho, ho,” he was gone. The bells over the door jingled as an after-effect.

Ron watched and thought there was something admirable about Julian’s actions. He had always been a fan of fast exits.

Warren clasped his hands together and leaned forward on the table. “He was not ready to have this conversation. My guess is that he felt too exposed.”

“Maybe it was us, Warren. Julian hasn’t been around for a long time and I’m sure that it wasn’t easy for him to come here tonight,” said Laureen. “He doesn’t love this place the way that we do. It holds some bad memories for him.”

Ron spoke up. “We all have some bad memories to deal with Laureen. It’s how we handle them that makes the difference.”

“Not everyone is as hard as you are Ron,” said Warren. “Laureen is right. I pushed him too hard. “

Ron wondered what the hell that they were talking about. No one had pushed Julian at all from what he could see. It seemed to Ron that he just didn’t want to spend another evening as Warren’s student. Then Ron wondered what he was doing there. He had his own students now and he was certain that he wasn’t going to ever sleep with any of them or pry into their personal lives for his own satisfaction the way that Warren did. But maybe they all wanted him to pry into

their lives. Maybe they all thought that he had some of the answers about themselves that they were yet to discover. Maybe Warren saw them all as lab rats. Maybe he saw himself as giving everything that he had in his life to his students. He was surely not shy about taking some things back. The truth was that every one of them around the table, with the possible exception of Zoe, knew exactly what the story was with this guy, especially Ron.

"What happened to you a while back in there?" said Warren looking at Ron. "You looked like you were in some kind of a trance? Have you been smoking or taking something?"

"No, I just caught up staring at the fire," said Ron.

"You're sure that was it?"

"Yeah, it's the first time that I have been around an open fire since the apartment burned up."

Laureen said, "I think that Ron has a whole lot on his mind these days."

The dinner table was lit by candles after Kelly and Zoe cleared the dishes. April and Laureen watched them but Ron got up and helped. They carried dishes down the galley style kitchen to the sink and then returned for more. Zoe managed to brush against Ron each time that they passed each other. Kelly never looked at him and seemed a bit annoyed by his nearness.

Then they all settled back to the table and Ron lit a cigarette.

Warren said, "So how's the teaching going?"

"I never expected to love it this much, Warren. I didn't understand how I would feel responsible for them."

"You have to let that go," said Warren. "You aren't responsible for them and you can't teach them anything that they aren't ready to learn."

"They need to learn to read and write. They are ready for that and that's what I'm concentrating on. It's interesting to see their language skills develop. And I do believe that it will help them immensely in their lives to be able to read and write well."

"Only if they want it to help them," said Warren.

Laureen said, "And how are the nuns?" She giggled after asking the question.

April's eyes got bigger in the light. "You are working at a Catholic school? With nuns?"

"I know," said Ron. "I know. But they're just people, ya know. Mostly they are very good people."

"And what do they think of you?" said April.

"I don't know," said Ron.

"They are going to put him in charge of discipline," said Zoe.

Laureen was in mid swallow of a glass of diet pepsi and began to choke and laugh at the same time. The soda went up her nose and she held a napkin to her face and choked while she turned red and laughed. Ron laughed too and Warren smiled.

April said, "I just can't picture you around nuns."

Zoe said, "Ron is the most sexual person that I ever met. Do you think that they pick up on that?"

Before they left, April said, "Will you call me? I really have missed talking with you." Ron said that he would.

As they drove home, Zoe snuggled into him and said, "It's exciting to be there."

Ron smiled. "Why did you find it exciting?"

"I don't know. It made me feel like I was at the center of things. And when Warren asked me questions at the table, it was embarrassing but at the same time it made me feel important. Like I was speaking and what I had to say mattered."

"I know what you mean," said Ron.

"You and Warren are a lot alike."

Ron felt himself tense when she said that. "Why do you think that?"

"You're both very strong and very smart. And you both know how to get what you want. Why doesn't Kelly like you?"

"It's a long story. I used to date one of her friends"

"She told me to be careful of you."

"That was nice of her."

"I didn't care what she said. I told her that I thought you and Warren are alike and she agreed but then said 'not in a good way though.'"

Ron felt himself getting angry. Julian had been right.

Chapter 35

Saturday morning was unbelievably cold and sunny. The wind blew the car as they drove passed the new football stadium on Route 3 as they made their way into New York City. They drove into a place called Sculpture Supply. Zoe was effervescent. She was bouncing up and down on the seat of the car before they even went into the place. Ron was thrilled to see her so happy and delighted.

"The sculpture is already in the stone," she told him as they wandered down the aisles that were like nothing Ron had ever seen before. There were heavy wooden racks and placed on them were pieces of rock. There were no labels, no prices. The understanding was that if you were shopping there, you knew what you were doing. Ron listened to her carefully as she spoke but he didn't look at her. His eyes were drawn to the rocks. He ran his hands over them. He stared at them from different angles. Zoe craned her neck to look at them from the top. "I love to work with marble. I think it is my favorite thing."

"More than painting?"

"Yes," she said dreamily, "much more than painting."

And then she stopped and stood very still. She was looking at a piece of white alabaster. It lay on its side and was rough all around. She rubbed her hands on her thighs before she touched it. Ron stood back from her and watched. She called someone over and they talked about the stone.

It was alabaster. It weighed 48 pounds. She could take it with her. She could afford it. Then Zoe began to cry. Ron looked at her with astonishment. Why was she crying? What had just happened?

"Zoe, is something wrong?"

She had her fist clenched tightly to her mouth and Ron could see that she was biting herself. Her body was trembling. "Everything is wrong," she said. "Everything."

"What do you mean?"

"What am I doing here?" she said. She looked at him as if it was his fault that they were in this place. "Why did you bring me here?"

Zoe, you asked me to bring you here."

"But why did you?" She stepped back from the stone and looked at him accusingly and then she turned on her heel and headed for the door. Ron stood there feeling completely helpless and confused. He felt the eyes of other people in the shop looking at him. There was the feeling of accusation that was coming from them. Then he started after her and caught up with her on the street alongside the car. He reached out and took her shoulders and turned her to him. Her face was scrunched and red. Tears were streaming down her cheeks and had pooled up in back of her glasses. Ron could see the light refracting on the tears in back of the lenses.

"I don't understand," he said.

"That stone is beautiful. It is perfect and I have no place to work on it. I don't have the right tools to work on it. I need more training to be able to do what I want to do with it and I am stuck here. I need a studio and all I have is a pad and pastels."

"But didn't you know all that before we came here?"

She slapped his face hard. He felt his neck snap when she hit him. And then she was turning and walking down to the street. The wind blew her hair to the side. Ron stood there motionless. He could not recall ever being slapped in the face before. Maybe he should just get into the car and drive away. He couldn't do that! And then he was jogging down the sidewalk after her. She heard him and saw him and then bolted. She was running full speed and Ron knew instantly that there was no way that he could catch her. He stopped running and watched as she reached the corner and then turned to the left and was gone.

He went back to the car and got in and turned on the engine. He was shivering. He was angry. He shoved his hands into his pockets and sat there thinking that he had given up the chance to take Robin to the airport for this.

A long time passed and then he got out of the car and looked around to see if he could spot her. He did not see her wedged into a doorway with her head in her hands and her shoulders shaking from the uncontrollable crying that wracked through her body. She told herself that she was being stupid. She told herself to get up and go to the car but she couldn't seem to move. She waited for his car to pull out and leave but it didn't. He turned off the engine and sat there smoking a cigarette. Why was he waiting for her? Why wasn't he just smart enough to see what she was and just leave?

She got up slowly and walked to the car. She opened the door and got in. She stared at him and waited. Without looking at her, he started the engine and began to drive back home.

She kept staring at him, waiting for him to scream at her. They went into the tunnel and when they were in the semi darkness and she could not see the face that had not taken its eyes from the road, she asked, "Why didn't you just leave me there?"

Still without looking at her, he said, "I was frightened for you."

Ron felt like he had crossed the border back from some alien land when the car shot out of the tunnel. Jersey reassured him. He knew the rules.

When they got back to the apartment, she said, "Will you just take me to bed?"

Ron said, "No."

He opened his book bag and spread papers out on his desk and began to work. She sat in a chair in the kitchen and watched him.

End of Part 1

Chapter 36

Ron was sound asleep in bed when the phone rang. He heard it as if in a dream and then it grew louder and he sat up in bed and fumbled for it. His voice was thick with sleep. "Hello."

"Good morning Ron," said the crisply starched voice of Sister Irene Emanuel.

"The school is closed today because of the snow. Enjoy your holiday."

"Thank you, Sister."

He put the phone back into its cradle and looked around the dark room. He rolled on his side and stretched up to look out the window. He could see nothing but a white sheet of snowy ice that stuck to the plane of glass in the darkness. He heard the muffled whisper of wind. He threw the covers off and got out of bed naked. He walked into the living room of his three room apartment and went to the bay windows that looked out onto Glenwood Avenue. The sight stopped him. Everything was buried under a blanket of snow and the wind was blowing the small flakes down in a slant that made everything look askew.

He smiled and padded back to his warm empty bed and crawled under the covers and pulled them up to his chin and closed his eyes.

Two hours later he woke up again and saw that there was light outside. The telephone was ringing again and Ron rubbed his face and reached for it. "Hello."

He could hear breathing on the other end of the line but there was no answer. He repeated, "Hello." Still there was no answer and he knew why. "Zoe, it's ok. You can talk to me. It's ok."

Still there was nothing but silence and the breathing. He waited several minutes and then said, "If you aren't going to speak, I'll just hang up."

He heard the receiver click and lay back down staring up at the ceiling. It had been this way since she left and went to Boston. Once a week, sometimes more, the phone calls. Sometimes, she actually was able to speak, but then she just began to cry and tell him how much she missed him and before he could answer, there would be that click.

They had been living together for months before he really figured out about her eating disorder. He didn't even know what bulimia was then. But he took the approach of trying to understand and being careful not to have any food in the

house. He took her out to eat every single night and stayed with her after they came home, sometimes following her trips to the bath room with his own and looking for the tell-tale smells of either vomit or air freshener. It came to a head the night that he had forgotten about a half-gallon of ice cream that Quimpy had brought over and woke up in the middle of the night to find her frying it and then pouring it into a bottle and gulping it down until she could make herself sick.

Ron closed his eyes. It was then that he told her that he would never consider having a baby with her while she was like this. After that, she talked about art school more and more. Her father had convinced her that she could not get student loans because of his income. Ron had showed her how to get around that, and then she left him to go to an art school.

Ron opened his eyes again. He didn't want to think about her anymore. He knew that if he kept thinking about her, it would come back to him how she had fucked Quimpy, and he would get angry and feel betrayed all over again.

Ron got out of bed and dressed in warm layers. He really didn't own a winter coat so he made up for it with two sweaters and his warmest jacket. He did have boots and wore two pairs of socks under them. His feet felt huge as he trudged through the snow to the corner luncheonette.

He never kept coffee in the house, or that much food at all. No one had been out to shovel their sidewalks and the one black walk required him to lift his feet high and feel a bit off balance.

The sidewalk in front of the luncheonette had been cleared and the lights from inside pulsed out through the windows. The snow blew into his face and melted on his lips and found its way into his mouth.

He stamped his feet when he entered. The counter man looked up and recognized him and nodded. "What a fuckin' mess this is," he said.

Ron nodded. "Half expected you guys to be closed."

The guy pointed up the ceiling. "It's an easy commute."

Ron got two containers of coffee and a buttered roll. He bought a quarter of a pound of chicken roll and a quarter of Swiss, figuring that he wouldn't be going out again anytime soon with the way that this storm looked. He trudged back out into the snow, holding one container in each hand, the roll stuffed into his shirt with the deli food tucked under his belt. The walk back was precipitous and Ron was sure that he was either going to fall or drop one of the containers. About half way back he felt the deli food slide down below his belt. "Fuck," he growled as he felt it inch lower with each step that he took. Still more than a half-block away and already feeling the package slip down to his upper thigh. Trying to bend his body

forward gripping the coffee containers in each hand and feeling it slip lower and lower; the deli meat now just above his knee.

Ron stopped and looked around and saw no place to set the containers down so that he could adjust. He bent lower and tried to press his elbow against the escaping package. Finally trying to cradle the second container against his chest, Ron reached down and grabbed the package through his pants. The pressure of his arm was too much and the lid popped off and the coffee spilled out against his jacket. Ron watched with dismay as it gurgled out over his glove, at first very hot and then swiftly cooling. Finally he just let it drop into the snow. He watched the brown circle spread out. He clutched the package and trudged the rest of the way back to his apartment feeling defeated.

Ron ate his roll and drank his remaining coffee sitting in front of his bay windows watching the snow come down. He liked watching the spectacle. His eyes watched the cars coming slowly down the street, some carrying absurd roofs filled with mounting snow and some completely cleared. He heard the click of chains as a bus rolled passed his windows. He felt like this was time in a bubble. His work was done for his next class. His papers were all graded. He knew what he wanted to do for the next couple of weeks.

It was then that a thought flashed in his mind. "Suppose I wrote the truth." The idea stunned him for a moment, but it didn't go away. Suppose he did write the truth? What difference would it make? He stared over at his typewriter and the pile of paper that rested, well stacked and empty, next to it. It was then that he saw the plow truck push the snow against his car and the other cars that were on that side of the street. The snow was icy and caked and dirty when it slid against his car and all but obliterated the sight of his wheels and parts of the front and rear fenders. "Shit!" he said aloud.

Wrapped in a scarf and with more layers of clothing on and slogging in his boots, Ron reached the car. His shovel was in the trunk so he held his arm against the top of trunk and tried to sweep the snow off. He got about halfway when the weight of it stopped his progress and ice made its way under his glove and up under his sleeve. He lifted his arm and shook it to get the ice out and this motion sent his glove into the snow. Ron looked down at the glove with a helpless feeling. Snow was already working its way into the fingers. He bent over and picked it up with his bare hand. His fingers were already turning red. The glove was wet and cold on his hand. This time he used his other hand to sweep and made it to the end before the ice and snow went up his other sleeve. "Motherfucker!" he said under his breath. Then he reached with his trembling and now bare fingers for his keys. He got them

out and tried to insert the key into the lock. It was frozen solid. He made a fist and slapped the lock. Then he put his gloves back on and tried to punch the ice off. Both of his hands were cold and stinging and going numb and the lock wasn't budging.

Sullenly, Ron trudged back across the street and up the stairs into the kitchen. When the ice on the underside of his boots contacted the linoleum of his lichen floor, his feet went up into the air and he came down flat on the floor. He lay there a moment in panic and checked his knees. They were ok. He exhaled a long sigh of relief and slowly got up, clinging to the side of the sink as his boots began to slide again. He bent down and took them off and hurled them at his door.

Ron ran the water until it was very hot and then filled an aluminum pot. He knocked the ice off of his boots in the tub. He put them back on and carried the pot of hot water down the stairs but he had forgotten to use a lid and the water sloshed out over his gloved hands and down his pants leg. It burned and he opened his mouth into an oval of pain. By the time he got across the street, almost a third of the water was wasted but he thought he still had enough. He poured it on the lock and watched it steam the ice away. The key went in easily now.

Ron liked to dig and he was good at it. He bent his back into it and found a rhythm and then he was able to open the car door and get inside and start it up. The exhaust made a black circle of soot by the tail pipe as Ron dug and listened to the car engine hum. An hour or so later, he was ready to give it a try. He felt exaltation when the car nosed its way out onto the street. And then he backed it in again. He gathered his now very cold aluminum pot and put the shovel in the back seat and went back up to his warm apartment, feeling a sense of accomplishment. Ron piled his wet icy clothes in a corner of the kitchen, put on clean, warm, dry clothes. He sat down at his desk and rubbed his hands together and looked back out admiringly at his work, just as the snow plow came back down the street and pushed a fresh load against the side of his newly re-encased transportation.

He laughed to himself. It really was absurd. Then he sat down at his typewriter and began to write. Where to start was easy. Lashly's class. What class? It just came out in a stream. Ron felt his hands flying over the keys and then he looked up and it was dark. How long had he been doing that? He was hungry. It was still snowing.

Ron went into the kitchen and took out the lunchmeat. He had no bread, but he did have some mayo. He rolled the chicken breast and the cheese into cylinders after coating the insides with mayo and went back into the front room to read what he had written. He was appalled. The truth was that he could not write a sentence

without having at least three typos and two misspelled words. He wanted to take out his red pen and put an F on every page, but set about to correcting the errors with a dictionary opened up beside the stack of fifteen pages that he has written. When he was finished he felt sick to his stomach. Whatever made him think that he could write anything? What was the matter with him? Of course his poetry was shit. Because he didn't know the language!

Ron ate silently and sulked, staring at the red marks that he had made like they were accusations. Then he heard a faint tapping at his door. He walked through the rooms and opened the door. No one was there, but on his mat was a small plate of macaroni and sauce. He looked down at it, both wincing and smiling at the same time. It was the old woman who lived next door to him. She was forever leaving him scraps like he was a pet. But Ron chose to see them as gifts. He never told her what he ate and what he flushed down the toilet. He always washed her dish and knocked politely on her door the next day and thanked her for being so kind to him and told her that she didn't have to do that. She never really answered and when Ron looked at her face, he saw someone who did not understand what he had been saying. He was unsure if she was hard of hearing or did not understand English.

But this time he was hungry and without thinking about it he just ate the food. It tasted good. It was cold but tasted good. He was just finishing when his phone began to ring.

"Ron the school will be closed until Monday. Enjoy your weekend and stay warm."

"Thank you Sister Irene. I'll see you on Monday."

It was Thursday night and his bubble had just gotten much bigger. He felt a rush of freedom surge through him as he walked back through the rooms. He turned on his stereo and Bob Dylan's voice sang "Changing of the Guard." He cranked it up and rolled a joint. He filled a large glass with water and sat back down at the typewriter. The music was distracting him. He tuned the volume down, but still the power of Dylan's words broke through and he found himself thinking about them as he tried to write. It was no good. He got up and found one of his Bill Evan albums and slipped it on. No voice, no words and now the piano was helping. It could give him a rhythm that he could write to. It was like his soundtrack. It kept the thoughts arranged in his head. The side was long finished before he realized that it wasn't playing anymore.

Ron turned the record over and then watered his plants. They were healthy and wild and they loved him back when he loved them. The music drew him back

to the desk. It was Zoe's desk. She had wanted it back. He had said that he would give it to her when she made some effort to pay back some of the money that she had borrowed from him. He had felt like an asshole doing that, but enough was enough. It's not like she ever used the desk and of all the dozens and dozens of drawings that she had made of him, she had given him none. He wondered why she had done that. She would just have destroyed them anyway. He loved the way that he looked through her eyes. What had Julian called her? A boardwalk portrait painter. Julian was an ass. Yeah, maybe he was, but he hadn't stolen her desk.

Chapter 37

Ron was asleep in his clothes when the phone rang. It was 3am. He knew immediately.

"Hi Ron, I know I've woken you."

"Hi Robin. It's ok. I don't have work tomorrow. I figured you didn't. I was talking to my Dad earlier and he said that it was snowing like hell. How are you?" Ron tried to think. How long had it been since he'd heard from her, six months. She must be working at a bar again and just getting home from work. "I'm ok. I'm snowed in but it's warm here."

"Are you alone?"

"Yes."

"Can we talk for a while?"

"Sure."

"I'm struggling with a decision Ron and I wanted to hear your voice. My boyfriend Keith wants me to move in with him."

Ron was silent. He felt his hand tighten on the phone. Well there went the rest of this night's sleep. "Do you love him?"

"Yes, I think I do."

Ron felt tears start to run out of his eyes. "Well, that will help," he said, hoping that she could not hear it in his voice.

"It didn't help us much did it?"

"I guess not."

"I never thought that I would be able to live with anyone but you. But I have been seeing him for a while now and it seems like the next step."

"I think you'll be fine Robin."

"He reminds me of you, but he's different."

Ron wasn't going to take the bait. He held the phone away from his mouth and tried to clear his throat so that his voice didn't sound heavy. Then he tried to be light. "Well, concentrate on the differences," he said.

"How's the teaching going?"

"It gets better all the time. I know the girls now. I know the school. I make fewer mistakes. I feel confident when I stand up in front of them."

She was silent for a while. Then she said, "Maybe I should come for a visit."

Ron almost choked out a sob. "You could stay here."

"I think that I would like that."

"When do you want to come?"

"In a couple of weeks. Before I do anything."

Ron said that he would pick her up at the airport and she said that she would call him with the information and then she was gone.

He sat up turned on the lights and went back to his typewriter. Maybe, just maybe if he could recreate how he was when she fell in love with him, she would fall in love with him all over again. Either that or at least it would be as if he had never met her. He wrote until he looked up and saw light coming through his windows. Then he went back to bed and was asleep almost immediately.

Chapter 38

The energy in the school that Monday morning was amped up to a degree that was startling. Many of the girls had been locked away in the houses since before the snow had started to fall, and they descended on the school with a burst of energy that was throbbing and palpable. They had tired of their mothers and siblings. They embraced the school like it was freedom itself.

Ron was overjoyed to see them and he smiled so much that his face hurt. He had gotten there early. Last year's experience had taught him that while part of the lot would be plowed out for the teachers' cars, that there would be a premium on spaces. Street parking was non-existent. Where there were spaces, chairs and boards had been pulled out to fill them until those people who dug the space out returned. It was an unwritten law of the city during snow. You cleared the space out and you owned it until the snow was gone. And if someone was foolish enough to move your chair, it was license to do whatever you wished in retaliation against the disrespectful car.

Last year's seniors were gone, but they had been replaced by another group that looked strangely younger to Ron. His 9th graders were now world wise sophomores who had gotten through their second fall. Many of them had signed up for one of the two electives that he was teaching: public speaking and creative writing. Some of them had taken both classes. Ron was not teaching Reading anymore and still taught Ninth grade and Twelfth grade English along with his electives.

His public speaking class was the first of the day and today he was going to introduce them to Extemporaneous Speeches. He had gone to the store that Sunday and bought five copies of the Star Ledger and five copies of the New York Times. The idea was that they would have 15 minutes to read, research, and then speak from their notes on a topic that he selected. The night before, he spent time scanning the papers and circling articles that were short enough for them to accomplish the task. Almost immediately, he abandoned much of the Times. The articles were just too long for what he had in mind. But another idea occurred to him and he had also circled pictures with long captions, thinking that they could just as easily work from those. But first he wanted to know how they were.

"So, how have the last four days been for you?" he asked at the very start of class.

The answer was loud and responsorial, "Boring," they said in unison. Then all of them laughed and Ron laughed with them.

"Didn't anyone do anything that was interesting?" said Ron.

Elena said, "You don't really want us to tell you about that stuff, do you Mr. Tuck?" Her dark eyes were dancing and her lips were curled into a tempting smile. There was a wave of giggles.

Ron made his exaggerated look of mock exasperation. "No Elena, not that stuff."

Sandy said, "Well I ate so much that wasn't sure that my uniform was going to fit."

Ron laughed. "I wound up living on chicken roll and Swiss cheese until Saturday because I didn't have food in my house and just about every place was closed."

There was a scattering of "Ewws" about his diet. Then Sonia said, "Don't you have anyone to cook for you, Mr. Tuck?"

Ron blushed and the girls laughed merrily. Some of the girls thought that they would be happy to cook for him while Ron explained the assignment. "Speeches will be short. Only two minutes each. Those of you that don't get to go

today, will go tomorrow. I put all your names into this basket, he held up a small wicker basket that he had found in his closet, left by the previous teacher in the classroom. So, it will be random who goes when."

He watched them as they worked. Some were trying to write out their speeches and Ron corrected them and said in a whisper, "You don't have time for that. Just take notes. I'll show you what to do." They smiled up at him and he knew that they trusted him and he felt his chest swell with pride at their trust. Fifteen minutes became twenty as Ron paced up and down the aisles. They were all working hard and he decided to let it go until he got the sense that they were mostly ready. It was not their fault if he had underestimated the amount of time that it was going to take them.

Finally, about twenty-five minutes in, he said, "OK, times up. Put down your pens, fold the newspapers and lay them aside." He heard their groans but knew that he wasn't rushing them too much. He let another minute go by. "Now," he said, "let's see who goes first."

Their eyes followed his hand as he reached unto the basket. He opened the slip of rolled up paper dramatically. "Angela Peronne."

There was a burst of laughter. Maria said, "She's absent, Mr. Tuck. You forgot to take attendance."

Ron laughed and quickly went in back of his desk and took attendance, saying, "See I was so happy to see you, that I lost my head there."

"Tammy Padilla, are you here?" Ron knew that she was and the tall girl with blonde streaks in her hair raised her hand. "Ok Tammy, up here in back of the podium."

"I have to do it up there," she said hoping that maybe if he forgot to take attendance, other things might have changed as well.

Ron moved to the side of the room, his face growing serious. The girls saw the shift and Tammy wiggled out of her desk and went to the front of the room.

"Now," said Ron. "Remember your posture, feet shoulder width apart, back straight, eyes on us, just glance down at your cards when you need them. Voice nice and loud, speak slowly.

"The Shah of Iran has left his country," said Tammy.

Sister Irene Emanuel's voice broke in over the loudspeaker. "May I have your attention please?" Her voice was crisp but Ron detected a bit of tension in it. "Due to circumstances beyond our control, we are going to have to close the school for the rest of the day. Girls you are to go to your lockers and collect your things.

Anyone who needs to call home, is to go to the convent where we will provide you with a phone and local calling privileges.”

The girls looked disappointed but they quickly got up and left. Ron felt disappointment as well. He had missed being with them and his mind had already raced ahead to his next classes and what they would be like. He gathered his books and slid them into the green canvas shoulder bag that he carried and walked over to the principal’s office.

Irene Emanuel looked distracted and rushed. She was in the hall in front of the office and shoing the girls out the door. “Is there anything that I can do to help, Sister”

She looked up at him almost not recognizing him at first. Then she smiled and said, “Please make sure the other building is cleared, Mr. Tuck and then if you could let me know.”

Ron crossed back into his building and looked around the first floor. Then he went to the girls’ room and knocked and waited. And then he opened the door and went inside. It was empty and well-manicured. He felt uneasy about being in there and quickly backed out and shut the door. He climbed the steps to the second floor. It was deserted. He came back down and saw that he was the only one in the building and then crossed back over the courtyard to her office. There was a circle of nuns and teachers standing around her. He caught her eye and said, “All cleared out Sister.”

She nodded and said. “We have a gas leak that has been determined to be dangerous. We will all be leaving this area at once. You can expect that school will be in session tomorrow unless you hear differently. Mr. Tuck, would you be willing to stay behind with me for a few moments?”

“Of course, Sister.”

He answered her without thinking. Sister Margaret Evette said, “Does this mean that we can’t work in our classrooms?”

The look of annoyance that passed over Irene Emanuel’s face was unmistakable. “Sister, for the safety of everyone concerned, we would be better served to clear the area.”

Margaret Evette nodded in an uncomprehending way. She wanted to go back to her class and be a model of vigilance. People started leaving the hallway. Ron heard Doris tell Marsha that she was getting as far away from this dump as she could. Marsha nodded and they both waddled towards their cars. Irene Emanuel reached out and touched Ron’s shoulder. “Thank you for your help,” she said. Ron answered, “You’d better be leaving too Sister.”

Irene Emanuel nodded. "I am as soon as I am sure that we have everyone out of here."

"Do you want me to run upstairs and check around?"

"No, Ron. I'll take care of it."

Ron walked out the door and thought that it was funny that no one had mentioned smelling gas. He made his way along the shoveled paths to his car and then he saw Sister Bernadette standing over by the Rectory. She was pacing, which was unusual for her. Her large shoulders were straight and square and her black shawl was gripped around them. "You ok, Bernadette?" She had told him to drop the "Sister" unless they were in front of other people by the end of the first year.

"What did she tell them was wrong?"

"Gas leak, but the funny thing is that I don't smell anything."

"You would have by the end of the day," said Bernadette with her sarcastic humor that she only showed to certain friends and some of her older students.

"I found a body in the basement," said Bernadette. "Father Jones decided that we should clear the school before calling the police. He was worried that the idea of a body might worry some of the parents. Now," she said pointedly, "he seems to have gone out and I have to wait here for him before I call the cops, which I am going to do for about two more minutes before I just make the call. I mean how could the old fool go out when he knew there was a body in the basement?" Ron searched her face and wanted to comfort her. He had never heard her talk disparagingly of the priest before. He knew that she must be genuinely distressed and admired her. He wasn't sure that he would be able to hold it together this well if he had just found a body. "I'll wait with you."

She smiled at him. It was a loving smile and Ron had seen it flash across her face before when they were helping some kid together or when he made a joke while they were talking over morning coffee, which they had together when he got in early. A couple of times he thought that he had seen desire in that smile, but he dismissed that idea, telling himself that he was completely nuts.

It was then that Father Jones opened the door of the Rectory and seeing Ron standing there with her frowned. "You'd better go," she said quietly. She started towards the Rectory door. Ron wanted to go with her but held back. It wasn't his place and he knew it. Jones watched the nun and knew that she had told him the truth. He had told Irene to not have her say anything and he kept her waiting while he was on the phone with the bishop making sure that he was doing the right thing. Ron got into his car and drove around the city. The streets were all cleared and the snow that was shoveled to the sides rose in high piles that blocked the view of the

sidewalks. After a few minutes, he circled back towards the school. There was a collection of police cars in the parking lot and a large red city ambulance. All had their lights flashing.

Ron wanted to stop and to offer some assistance but he knew that at this point his presence would just be an embarrassment to people that he had come to truly like. So he drove up Heller Parkway and through the park and out of the city of Newark and into the Bellville Silver Lake district.

The stores and sidewalks were clean here. There were sanitation trucks that were gathering the snow and leaving the streets completely free. Ron smirked and thought to himself that nothing was too good for Silver Lake. The legend was that it was the place where the connected guys had their parents installed. The shops had the best meats and produce. It was rare that you ever heard anyone who was not speaking Italian when you were in these stores. The legend was also that if you were black you could drive through the area but that you were not allowed to walk the streets or shop in any of the stores.

What was he doing back here? Bodies in the basement, restricted neighborhoods and priests that lied. Hadn't he seen all of this before and decided that it was not going to be part of his life? Hadn't he decided that these people were so clannish in the way that they saw the world that he would always be an outsider? The thoughts flooded him in torrents and he wanted to go back home and write again. But he drove his car up to his Mom's new ceramics shop on Bloomfield Avenue just outside of Newark.

Ron found a place to park about a block and a half up the Avenue. He was in front of a liquor store a safe spot. He stuck his hands into his pockets and walked down the street. People were coming out today. They looked like nocturnal creatures who were wincing at the sight and feel of sunlight. The reflection off the snow made the glare worse and they squinted and shuffled with uneasy steps. Only Marjorie and her new partner Lois, who had somehow gotten the nickname Bumpy, were in the shop. Marjorie was stunned but happy to see him. "Ronald," she smiled "is everything ok? Did something happen at work?"

"We got sent home," he said.

"Did you lose your job? Did something happen? Did they fire you?"

Ron was surprised at the remarks. "No Mom, the only one who has ever fired me was you." It was true. He was in college and working at her employment agency. Things were starting to get rough in her business and she called in an expert to tell her how she could cut her overhead. The guy had looked at her business and cash flow and recommended that she let one of her agents go. There wasn't enough of

an outside business to support all three agents now. Marjorie was bringing in the bulk of the referrals with her contacts at local banks and she was really paying about a quarter of the salaries of the others out of her share. Ron was working part time, cold canvassing for new leads and his efforts were producing some listings but when the man said that somebody had to go, Marjorie decided that her son was the most expendable. She knew that he could get another part time job and these other people were feeding their families from what they made at the agency. So, she fired him that afternoon, no notice. Ron had been pissed at the time but the benefits of throwing it up over the years had already eclipsed what she was paying him.

“Do you always need to bring that up?” she said.

“They sent us home,” said Ron. “They said it was a gas leak but Sister Bernadette told me that they found a body in the basement.”

“Again with the bodies in the basement?” she said. “What is this fixation that you have about bodies in the basement? Do you think that you need to talk to someone about this? It really is getting to be too much.”

Ron laughed and remembered his dream and the way that he had told her about it. He thought that it really was funny that he hadn’t made the connection. The truth was that there wasn’t a connection, as he saw it. It was a coincidence.

Bumpy was carrying in a batch of new molds and Ron was impressed at the way that the short, stocky woman was able to heft the weight. She really was as strong as a man.

“I haven’t seen you in a while and I didn’t expect to have the afternoon off.”

“I’m glad that you came Ronald. I’ve been waiting to call you.” She paused and sat down close to him and lit a cigarette. She was smoking Virginia Lights these days and every time Ron saw the package he couldn’t help but hear the jingle and the line, “You’ve come a long way baby.”

She drew in on the cigarette and said, “George moved out.”

Ron was stunned. The idea of George or his mother or his father going anywhere had never even slightly occurred to him. “What do you mean?”

“I mean he moved out. He’s living with another woman and he wants a divorce.” Ron watched as her faced tightened and saw the tears that filled her eyes. “I’m not sure what I’m going to do. Thank God for Lois or I think I would go out of my mind.”

Ron sat there feeling stunned. George had left? What was gonna happen to his Mom?

Chapter 39

Ron's seniors sat in front of him with expectant faces. He had taken attendance. He had explained that because of the lost day yesterday that it was necessary to get right to work.

"Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's strangest plays. It was written after the death of Queen Elizabeth and Willie was doing a few things. Mainly he was kissing up to his new King, but at the same time he was instructing him on how to be a king. Now that is a delicate thing to do and you will see his genius in doing it. People in the theater are frightened of this play. The legend is that it's bad luck to mention the name in a theater and so they always refer to it as The Scottish Play. There are all kinds of stories of bad things happening, people being killed during performances, theaters burning down. Lots of weird stuff and then, of course, there are the witches." Ron stopped and looked at their faces. He was checking to make sure that none of them had drifted. "What is the word in Spanish for witch?"

"Bruja," they said in a chorus.

"And what does it mean to be a witch?"

"Sometimes it just means an old woman," said Connie Gonzalez.

"I think it means a sorceress," said Imelda Cruz.

"Both of those things are true in this case. But it also means a servant of the devil. Witches were a big thing in Shakespeare's time. The King, his name was James, actually wrote a book about how to identify witches."

"Sometimes it means a prostitute," said Barbara Rodriguez.

Ron noticed that his Spanish students were the only ones responding and realized that he had to get the other girls involved again. It was a tough balancing act to meet the needs of some students in this school without alienating others. "Well, in the English tradition, it doesn't really mean that. And besides, these women were so ugly that they would have had to pay men."

The girls giggled nervously and Ron wondered if he should have said that but he went on. "Ok so he's kissing up to the King and he is also writing a great play about ambition and obsession. Now the language is going to be difficult, but I'll help you through it and last year many of the girls told me that this was their favorite book for the year. So let's get started. I want notebooks out there are going to be lots and lots of notes. But right now, just listen."

Dutifully they looked up at him. It amazed Ron to see their faces and he felt this incredible surge of power and responsibility. He wondered for at least the one hundredth time how Lashly could have ever allowed himself to become sexually intimate with his students. It just wasn't even close to fair.

He started dramatically. "Now there is this war, a civil war. I'll explain later why it was being fought. But one of the main guys on Macbeth's side went over to the enemy and convinced this guy Norway to attack Scotland. And some of the Scottish troops fought with the traitor. Now our guy Macbeth, we'll call him Mac." There were more giggles. Ron liked to call Shakespeare Willy and to shorten or give slang names to the characters. He felt that it made the play more accessible. The other teachers in the English department had scoffed disdainfully when he mentioned the idea at a department meeting. "So Mac sees the traitor and wades across the battlefield killing people as he goes."

Ron mimicked Mac, wading into the class shoving the desks with the girls still in them back until he made a path for himself.

"Mac's like a superhero," said Connie.

"Yes, he is. He's a very brave and forceful fighter." Ron fixed his eyes on Imelda, who was sitting in the last row. He pushed his way towards her, making a mess of the configuration of the room. Finally, he stopped in front of her desk. "Then Mac takes his sword and unseams him from the navel to the chops," said Ron, quoting from the play. "Which means he sliced him open," he turned to the class and pointed to his navel, and then traced a line up his chest to his throat, "from here to here. Then he cuts off the traitor's head and holds it up on the end of his sword and lets up a loud whoop." Again Ron mimicked Macbeth's action and whooped, just as he saw Irene Emanuel at his door.

The principal entered the room and the girls sat up very straight and tried to look studious in the mess of a classroom. Some went so far as to open their books and to look down. She looked at them for a long moment and then let her eyes take in the disarray of the room and then she finally settled her gaze on Ron.

Ron grinned at her and said triumphantly and with an absurd confidence and enthusiasm, "Come in Sister, we are just starting Shakespeare."

"Let's do hope the building survives the play, Mr. Tuck. May I see you for a moment?"

"Yes Sister. Straighten out the desks, girls and start to look at the first scene. I'll be right back and remember, notebooks out."

Ron went to the door with the nun. She smiled at him and said, "Please don't get them all worked up so that the rest of the day is spent talking about what Mr. Tuck said or did in their other classes again."

Ron lowered his head in mock penance and said, "No Sister I won't, but the language is hard for them and if I don't get them hooked into it early, I think it will really be a tough go."

"Well, I'm happy that I don't have to follow your act, Mr. Tuck," she said with her pursed lips, but by now he knew her well enough to be able to tell that she wasn't really upset. "There's a meeting of the faculty council after school and after a very short meeting of the whole faculty to discuss what happened yesterday. Do not discuss any rumors with the girls today until I have had a chance to meet with the faculty and then we'll have the council meeting afterwards."

"Yes Sister."

After classes the faculty congregated in the convent. Students who normally stayed for after school activities were told to report to the cafeteria, where two of the nuns were assigned to supervise them. Not too many of the girls attended. Most took the opportunity to crowd into the corner store where Ron still got his coffee twice a day. Those who went to the cafeteria either disliked the luncheonette or were forbidden to go there by parents, whose punishments made it not worth the risk.

Ron took a few drags on a cigarette as he walked the outside route to the convent. When he rang the bell, an elder sister who no longer taught but spent her days with housekeeping and cooking answered. "Yes?" she said warily.

"I'm here for the faculty meeting," said Ron.

"Are you from the police?" asked the nun her face was pudgy and her steel rimmed glasses continued to regard him with suspicion.

"No, Sister, I'm a teacher at the high school."

She sniffed the smoke that was radiating from him and challenged him. "At this high school?"

"Yes Sister. My name is Ron Tuck."

She scrunched her face into a sneer, stepped back from the door and opened it wider. "Oh," she said. As he walked passed her, she caught the odor of cigarette smoke on him, and she shook her head in disgust.

"As all of you know, we had an unfortunate incident that occurred yesterday. I know that I told you there was a gas leak and for that I apologize, but that stretch of the truth was necessary. It seems that a man, a street person really, we used to call them hobos when I was younger, was found to have met the lord in our

basement. We have all prayed for the repose of his soul and I invite you to join me now in doing so again.” She led them through an Our Father and 3 Hail Marys. “May his soul and all the souls of the faithfully departed through the mercy of God rest in peace”

Ron felt like they were all doing penance for the dead guy. When the prayers were finished, Irene Emanuel continued. “Now I know there have been lots of rumors swirling about and most of them are utter foolishness. There was no foul play that occurred on our school grounds and it is important that we get that message out when we are asked. It is also important that we do not let this unfortunate incident distract us from the business at hand, and so it is my hope that after today we will hear no more about it. However, people being the way that they are, if you are asked by parents or by students and they have further questions, please direct their calls to me. They should not be calling the rectory or anywhere else to engage in their quest for details.” She enlarged her eyes and pursed her lips with the word “details” elongating it and pausing both before or after it to ensure the fact that her meaning was very clear. “Now, unless there are any other questions, many of us have students waiting and I suggest that we resume our duties.” After this last line she smiled and stood adding, “I wish to thank you all for your anticipated cooperation.”

Clearly questions were not being encouraged. But Doris who had been at the school longer than Irene Emanuel and did not have a particularly high opinion of her since the nun had stopped giving her the last period of the day off and allowing her to leave school early, raised her hand.

“I would like to know if the school is safe,” said Doris loudly.

“Of course, we are safe,” said Irene Emanuel with look of mock shock and real condescension on her face.

“Well how did the bum get into the basement?” persisted Doris.

“Father is checking into that and we are having the maintenance man and two of the church deacons checking all of the locks on doors and windows to make sure that this can’t ever happen again.

Doris turned to Marsha and muttered sarcastically, “Oh, now I feel safe.”

Irene Emanuel heard her as did most of the people in the room. But Irene just chose to ignore the quip and made note that Doris would never have a late afternoon prep again. The meeting adjourned and people either left for the day or made their way back over to the school.

The girl who was to be seen by the faculty council that afternoon was not given the option of leaving and coming back or of going to the cafeteria. She was

seated in one of the hard back chairs in the principal's office with her secretary as visible evidence of her misdeeds. Ron knew the girl very well. Her name was Immaculada Santiago and she had been in his reading class the year before. He liked the girl but knew that she was an airhead who had minimal interest in reading writing or, Ron would have suspected, any of her other classes. She had a boyfriend. She was there marking time until she got married. She had had her "Fifteens" coming out party in the fall and soon after she had formally began dating her brother's best friend. Ron knew why she was there. The girl was excessively late to school and to her classes. The end of each class required a trip to the lavatory where she primped and studied herself in the mirror. Re-combed her hair, washed her hands and put on hand lotion to make sure that she did not chap. This was her second visit to the council. The first had come after she had amassed her initial ten lates. If the teachers had marked her to the minute, that would have taken less than a week, but most let it go saying that was just how Immaculada was. Now she had amassed twenty lates and it was required that a parent join her for this second appearance before the faculty council. Her mother sat next to her staring at her shoes and wondering how long this nonsense would take.

The faculty council met in the lay teachers' lunch room. On the days when these meetings were held, there was a note attached to the inside of the front door by Irene Emanuel reminding the teachers that there was going to be a meeting that afternoon in the room and that it should be in "presentable condition." This year's council consisted of Ron, Sister Bernadette, Marsha and Irene Emanuel. Bernadette and Ron conspired as often as they could to keep the girls out of trouble and Irene Emanuel knew that it had been a mistake to allow Bernadette to serve on the committee. But she had volunteered and garnered support and although Irene Emanuel, who could have blocked her appointment with the choir rehearsals as an excuse, had allowed things to move forward. Ron had been given the job as chairperson of the committee, an election that both startled him and most of the rest of the faculty, who were sure now that the school was going to ruin. The truth was that Irene Emanuel ran the committee and every other committee in the school and she could, if she chose, overrule the council's decisions as the principal's discretion, but she did like the appearance of democracy.

They sat around the round table and Ron read through the card that had the dates of Immaculada's unexcused latenesses on them. Then he read the additional excused latenesses and did some quick math in his head.

"Immaculada," he said gently, "you are late almost half of the days that school is in session. Can you tell us what's wrong?"

Mrs. Santiago shot Immaculada a feigned look of anger and then moved her hair to the side and stared out the window and tapped her long manicured fingernails on the leather purse that she held on her lap. The girl put her head down and muttered, "I don't know. I will try harder," looking up after the last statement with the absurd hope that her promise would be enough. It was what her mother had told her to say.

But Bernadette was having none of it. "Are you unable to get out of bed early enough?"

"Immaculada was almost indignant. "No Sister, I get up every morning at 5:30."

Irene Emanuel said simply. "School begins at 8 am."

Bernadette looked at Mrs. Santiago. "What time does she leave the house?"

The mother and the girl exchanged a worried look. The mother set her jaw and said, "I'm not really sure, Sister Bernadette."

But Bernadette already knew where she was going with this. She had seen it before. "Do you come straight to school when you leave the house?"

Immaculada stared straight down like she wanted to burn a hole into the floor. "No Sister."

"Do you go to your boyfriend's house?"

Her face was so flushed and her voice was barely a whisper. "Yes, Sister." Then she began to cry. Ron felt sorry and was moved by the sight of the tears rolling down the girl's rouged cheeks. The women were not.

Bernadette now sat back. She had heard what she expected to hear. She knew that the girl was going to her boyfriend's house to make his bed and to help his mother and learn to cook his meals in the way that he was accustomed to having them prepared. She knew that this happened with full knowledge and probably the support of Mrs. Santiago. It was all a matter of priorities.

Irene Emanuel directed herself to Immaculada. "Do you understand that a continuation of this behavior can result in you being asked to leave this school?"

The girl was sobbing now. "Yes Sister."

Then Ron spoke up. "Does your father know about this?"

The girl abruptly stopped crying. The look of fear that blazed onto Mrs. Santaigo's face was evident. The tension in the room became immediately thick.

The older woman leaned forward and looked at Ron. "Please, Mister. Please don't say that you are going to tell him."

Now everyone was uncomfortable. Irene Emanuel broke the silence. "I don't think that there will be any reason to involve anyone else as long as this behavior

is corrected. However, this Saturday and next Saturday morning, Immaculada, we'll see you at the convent at 8 am so that you can work off the time that you owe us." The principal escorted the mother and daughter out of the room. They both looked as if they had been tortured. Bernadette leaned over and whispered to Ron. "He'd beat both of them for shaming him."

Chapter 40

Ron's tutoring appointments were sporadic. The process was involved. He would get a call from the Learning Disabilities Testing Coordinator or the LDTC as she was known and then he would go in and meet with her to get his assignment. The length of time that the students were on what was called "bedside instruction" varied depending upon their injury or condition. In the winter months, he would wind up tutoring every afternoon and sometimes all day on Saturdays. The money was nice. It was far more than he was being paid at the school but there was a catch. Ron was not certified and Quimpy had made arrangements for this lack of credentials never to be mentioned. It was Quimpy whose job it was to keep a record of the certificates and so Ron's was never mentioned. The plan was that if he was ever asked that he would admit that he had lied and Quimpy would say that he thought that his secretary had kept them all on file and would have mentioned it to him if there was a problem.

Mostly Ron was given the kids who had been excluded from school because they had drug problems. The Superintendent's strategy was just to keep those kids on bedside indefinitely. But this afternoon's case was different. Ron was ushered into the office of the school's psychiatrist and sat with him and the LDTC. Charles Rothstein had been doing the job of school psychiatrist for about twenty years. He was a thin man with a very short gray beard and closely cropped hair. He spoke with a New York accent that Ron placed somewhere like Brooklyn. Charley began by asking Ron about his other two cases.

"So how are the fuck-ups doing?"

Ron smiled and shook his head. "Well they show up most of the time, but the only work that gets done, gets done while I am there with them. They don't really believe in homework."

"If they understood what school was about in the first place they wouldn't be in this situation would they, Ron?"

"I don't know," said Ron. "They aren't bad kids. They're just, like you said, fuckups."

Charlie nodded and teased, "And that's why Quimpy recommended you for them. He figured that if anyone would understand how to work with fucked up kids that it would be you."

"Yeah, said Ron. "I'm not sure how to take that, but thanks."

"If they give you too much shit, just remind them that this is their only chance of getting any credit for the year and to have a new start next year. You've got them over a barrel and don't hesitate to use it if you have to."

"I know."

"Now, James Devin is a whole different matter. This kid is seriously fucked up. He's a normal sixteen year old kid who is going through his father's drawer one day looking for rubbers or who knows what, and he finds a picture of the old man dressed like a woman and sucking some guy's dick."

Ron involuntarily glanced over at the LDTC but her face was an inscrutable mask.

"How did the kid take it?" said Ron.

"Not very fucking well at all," said Charlie with a bitter laugh. "He locked himself in his basement and he hasn't come out since."

"Oh Jesus," said Ron.

"Now I'm trying to get him some good shrink help but we don't make house calls and the kid refuses to come out. If we can't get him some education, the boss wants to move on him for being an incorrigible truant and have him turned over to the courts. Which, I believe, will complete the job of totally screwing the kid."

"Ok," said Ron thoughtfully. "What do you want me to do?"

"Teach the little fucker."

Ron laughed, but Charlie was no longer smiling. "I have spoken to his teachers and everyone is going to be cooperative here. Just give us something that we can use to say that the kid did some work and they will pass him. If that doesn't work, I'll have you made the teacher of record and you can give him his grades." Natalie, the LDTC, spoke for the first time. "We don't think that it will come to that and we have seen some of the work that you have been able to do with kids that wouldn't do anything for other tutors."

"I'll do my best," said Ron.

"Just do enough to get it done," said Charlie. "I think this is a temporary condition and if we can help this kid enough to get him into counseling by the summer time, I think he's got a chance."

"Where's the father now?"

Natalie said, "That's the other thing, when James found the pictures, he

brought them to his mother who had no idea,” at this point she dramatically rolled her eyes, “and she threw the father out. They are getting a divorce.”

Charlie broke in, “So now on top of everything else, the kid thinks that he was responsible for ruining his family.”

“I can understand that,” said Ron. “My parents are divorced.”

“But not cause your father sucked dick and had pictures taken of himself doing it,” said Charlie.

They gave Ron a pile of books and assignments and a phone number and then he left the office and walked out through the line of cubicles thinking about how much more professional this school looked than his did.

He drove back into Clifton’s border section with Paterson and rang the bell for his other tutoring appointment. Dennis Mooney was caught selling pot at the school. Ron had been working with him for about a month. Dennis was a blonde kid with a bad complexion and poor hygiene. Ron didn’t particularly like going to the house because it smelled bad and he always felt like itchy when he left. He rang the doorbell and heard movement inside, then Dennis’s face behind a curtain. Dennis said from the other side of the door, “I can’t do it today.”

“Come on Dennis,” you know what they said about missed appointments. They have to pay me anyway.”

“No offense Mr. Tuck, but I really don’t give a fuck.”

Ron shook his head. “Ok Dennis, see you next time.”

Ron got back into his car and drove home. He thought to himself that he shouldn’t care. He was getting paid. The school was just covering its ass because they didn’t want Dennis in the building. And Dennis didn’t give a fuck. Why should he? But images of a bleak future for the kid haunted Ron all the way back home. He stopped off at a new Chinese restaurant that had just opened up down the street from him and ordered some hit spiced shredded beef with carrots. He sat at the desk in his front room and ate the food out of the container while he reread Macbeth and thought about the next day’s classes.

Chapter 41

“Motif is a literary term that means,” Ron turned to write on the chalkboard as he spoke, “a repeating theme or image that gathers significance as it is repeated.” He wasn’t sure that was the dictionary definition but he knew that it wasn’t far from being the truth. “Shakespeare uses lots of motifs in Macbeth. One is clothing. The way that people’s clothes are described as fitting them and the way that people’s lives are described with images of clothing is one of the motifs. Mac says, ‘Why do you dress in borrowed robes?’ when the witches first call him the Thane of Cawdor. Now what are some of the motifs that use clothing that we use today?”

Connie raised her hand. Smiling she said, “That girl dresses like a slut.”

The girls laughed their nervous laughter when one of them made a reference to sex. Ron stopped as if he had been frozen by the comment. “Now that’s not exactly what I had in mind.” The girls laughed again.

Barbra raised her hand. “Is it like when we call the nuns penguins?”

She said it in a hushed voice and the class was quiet after she said it.

Ron smiled a big grin. “That’s it exactly! Now that image is considered a bit insulting, but that is exactly what I am talking about. What do we learn about people from their clothes?”

Immelda said, “Whether or not they have any taste.”

The girls were in a comfort zone again and laughed merrily.

“Whether or not they have money,” said Barbara.

“Sometimes,” said Ron, “but people make lots of mistakes by judging others based on their clothes, don’t they?”

The girls nodded but Ron knew that they didn’t believe him. He knew that they judged everyone by the appearance that person made, maybe more than any one single thing.

Connie had a devilish look on her face. “What about the way that you dress, Mr. Tuck?”

Ron paused dramatically. He stood close to the girl’s desk and said with feigned sternness that they knew by now was not actually real, “And what about the way that I dress?”

More giggles.

Connie was silent as if his nearness had taken away her courage but Immelda, who Ron had cast as the traitor, said. “It is kind of corny.” Then she added quickly. “I’m not saying that you are corny, Mr. Tuck but the way that you dress is.”

Ron smiled. "And what is so corny about it?"

Carmella said. "A pale green leisure suit, Mr. Tuck. Are you really asking us what is corny about that?"

The girls cracked up. They laughed really hard and Ron laughed with them. Then he said, "Well Carmella, the truth is that I didn't have anything to really wear when I got this job. I spent my life living in jeans t-shirts and work shirts. So when I got hired here, my stepfather gave me some clothes." Then he repeated. "Borrowed robes. What does that mean?"

Connie said, "What do you call it... hand downs."

"The phrase is hand-me-downs and that is exactly right. So what does it mean?"

Connie said, "Is Mac insulted because he thinks that they are saying that he is poor?"

"Not exactly," said Ron, "but you're on the right track."

Then Barbara's face lit up. Without raising her hand she said, "Why are you saying that I'm something that I am not."

"Perfect!" exclaimed Ron and he smiled triumphantly at the girl.

Barbara continued, "Cause you aren't corny even if you look like you are." And then everyone, including Ron, laughed too.

That afternoon Ron drove up to meet James Devin. He was a tall kid and very pale. His hair was dark and curly and piled up on his head. He answered the door promptly and called up to his mother saying that the tutor was here. She answered with an OK, but Ron was a bit surprised that she didn't come downstairs to meet him. He made a mental note to stop upstairs and say good-bye to her unless she came down during the lesson. For some reason, Ron expected him to be disheveled but his shirt was neatly pressed and so were his jeans. They even had creases. Then Ron looked down and saw that James was wearing purple flip-flops and that his toenails were painted black. He made a mental note. It was the kind of detail that Charlie would want to know.

The young man's voice was very soft. He caught Ron up on where he was in each of his classes and slowly Ron reviewed each of the assignments that the teachers had provided. He was annoyed when James told him twice that he had already done the assignment that had been given to Ron.

"We did that before I stopped attending," James said in a voice that Ron thought seemed dignified.

“OK,” said Ron. “I’ll work on getting you new assignments but in the meantime do this.” Ron looked ahead in both the history and English books and assigned the next story or chapter along with the study guide questions that accompanied it. It was a boring approach and Ron knew it, but it was also what the teachers wanted to see. Ron had the feeling that it was also what they did in their classes. He knew that when he talked to the kid about the chapters or stories that it was then that there might be an opportunity for some learning to take place.

About forty-five minutes into the review of where James was with his studies, Mrs. Devin came down the stairs. She was shockingly pretty. Ron smiled and stood up but James just sat back and seemed to shrink.

“I’m Sheila Devin,” she said extending her hand.

Ron took her hand and found it warm and dry and soft. He introduced himself. And they both remained standing while Ron reviewed the rules of Home Instruction. She nodded from time to time and said that there would be no problem for her to be home for each of his visits. Ron scheduled him for two days during the week and a Saturday appointment. James seemed to grow smaller and smaller as the conversation continued. When Mrs. Devin left, James had actually brought his knees up to his chest and turned on his side facing away from Ron. One flip-flop was dangling off the end of his foot. He did not respond to Ron’s first question.

Finally he said in a voice that was barely audible, “Did they tell you why I am at home?”

“They told me that you had trouble leaving the house.”

“That’s a joke,” said the boy.

“What do you mean?”

“I never leave the house. I never leave the basement.”

“You will,” said Ron.

“Sure,” said James. “I will.”

Ron tried to turn the conversation back to history but James didn’t respond.

Ron said, “Why don’t we call it a day. You have plenty of work to do.”

“Will you come back or am I too much of a freak?”

“I don’t think you’re a freak at all,” said Ron.

“Yeah, right,” said James his voice trailing off.

He did not get up to see Ron out the door.

When Ron drove back to his house, he checked his mailbox as he normally did. He was surprised to see that he had mail. Usually when his checks came from tutoring, he knew to be expecting them, but he had just gotten that check last

week. This was a postcard and Ron was half expecting that it was some advertisement until he recognized the handwriting on the other side.

Ron,

I won't be coming to visit. I have decided to move in with Keith. Good luck.

Robin

He turned the card back over to the front and saw that it was a picture of the Guthrie Theater. He turned it to the back and reread it. He walked up his stairs heavily and found a small plate in front of his door with four cookies that were wrapped in a napkin. He opened the door and went in and threw the cookies and the postcard into the garbage.

He walked into the front room and then walked back out to the kitchen. He just couldn't face being alone in the apartment right then. He dropped the bookbag that was still slung over his shoulder onto his kitchen table, locked his door and went back down the stairs.

He turned on his car and began to drive not sure where he was going. Then he was on the Parkway and heading south. At first he thought that he was going to drive to Rahway, but quickly he knew that was a silly idea. He thought about how he developed an attachment to people and places and how once the people were gone, he revisited the places hoping for the same feeling to still be there. He found that it was people and place and time and when all three did not come together, then it was different.

He got off the parkway at Elizabeth and drove down to Cherry Street where he and Robin had lived in their last apartment in New Jersey together. His car rolled passed the place slowly and he looked and saw a weird familiarity combined with an emptiness that reassured him of his earlier thoughts: people and places and time. Now the place just had ghosts. The car continued down the street and went passed his old apartment. An image of the fire sprang up in back of his eyes and seemed to be calling to him. He continued down the street and turned off onto a main street and realized why he had come here.

The French Maid was a go-go bar. Ron had not been able to afford to go to it when he lived in Elizabeth but now he had extra money from tutoring and he could not remember the last time that he had been with a girl. He wanted to sit in the dark with some wine and stare at them gyrating on the stage and imagine that they were twisting and wiggling for him as he listened to the loud bar songs. He walked into the club and the music almost blew him back out the door. It blared painfully loud. The room was filled with a haze of smoke and spotlights burned down on the rectangular stage. There was a pole on each end of the stage and 3

girls wearing G-strings and tiny bras were twisting and turning to the incredibly loud sound. Ron slid into bar chair and almost immediately a barmaid in French Maid t-shirt was in front of him putting down a cocktail napkin. She was chewing gum and had short dark hair.

“What can I get you, honey?”

“Some white wine please,” said Ron.

She was gone in a wink and back with a large tumbler that was filled to the brim with white wine. Ron laid a twenty dollar bill down on the bar and it too disappeared almost before it hit the wood. When she returned with his change it was all in single dollars.

Ron sipped and sat back to watch. Slowly his eyes and ears adjusted. He drank from the glass again. One of the dancers was in front of him and shimmying her hips back and forth and smiling down at him. Ron watched her and grinned back. She stayed on the ends of his eyes for about ten seconds and then she strutted away proudly and took up position in front of another guy. Ron watched as the guy stared at her and then saw the man take a dollar bill and hold it out. The dancer sat on the bar floor and then hopped down and held her breasts out to the dollar bill. The guy slipped it between them and the girl squeezed them closed on it and then hopped back up on the stage. Ron thought, so that’s how it’s done. The girl stood in front of the man who had given her the dollar and then turned and bent over and looked at him from between her spread legs. She waved to the guy and then moved away, strutting and moving her eyes down the bar. As Ron watched, he saw a pattern develop. Two of the girls would dance against the poles and on the stage but the 3rd girl would walk along the bar and deftly pull the skimpy bra to the sides revealing her nipples to the men who would then slide the bill towards her. She would clasp it in her fingers and then squeeze her breasts alongside them as she moved on to the next man. A girl could get called down for a tip, but then she went right back up on stage until it was her turn in the rotation to work the bar. Not every guy would tip her and as she moved along the bar she would smile and wiggle and watch to see if the man’s hand moved towards his money. If it did not she would toss her head to the side like she was discarding him and move to the next patron.

The bar walk signaled the end of her set and then she would disappear and a new girl would come out and begin to work a pole walk the stage and one of the other girls would come down from the stage and begin to work the bar. It was continuous.

Ron waited nervously as he saw the girl coming to his side of the bar and beginning to make her way from one stack of bills to the other. He reached out dutifully and folded his bill lengthwise and when the redhead was in front of him and standing straight and wiggling her shoulders and making her breasts shake back and forth, he extended his arm. The bill projected out from his fingers and poked her in the chest as she leaned towards him. She clasped and smiled for him. He had been awkward and didn't get a chance to feel her smooth breasts slide along his fingers. He would do better next time. The hour went by in a comfortable haze of light and sound and wine.

Chapter 42

Ron's technique for doing the play was one that he'd thought out. He had tried having the students read the play out loud in class, assigning each of them a role. But the language was too difficult and the girls had struggled with it and not enjoyed the experience. That was when he went to the Bloomfield Public Library and found that they had recordings of all of Shakespeare's plays. From then on, he played the recording while he and the girls followed along and listened to the actors read their parts as they were meant to be heard. He would frequently stop the recording to discuss what they had just read and listened to. But today he had a new approach to start with.

"How many of you have heard of Bruce Springsteen?" he asked at the start of the class. A few scattered hands went up into the air and Ron saw immediately that they were not the hands of the Spanish speaking girls. "I want you to listen to these words," he said. Then immediately he changed his mind and turned to the blackboard and wrote as it scribbled, printing in large block letters that pressed hard into the chalkboard and reciting as he wrote.

"All men want to be rich and rich men want to be king and a king ain't satisfied until he controls everything." Then he turned back to them and let the words sink in. Then he repeated it slowly and underlined each word as he spoke. What do you think of that?" he said.

"I don't think that all men want to be rich," said Patricia Nieves.

"You don't?" said Ron.

"I think some men want to be rich but some people just want to be happy. If they can be rich and happy, that's great. But they would not want to be rich and unhappy."

Ron stopped. He smiled. "That was an incredibly insightful thing of you to say."

The girl beamed and wiggled in her chair for him.

"But," said Barbara, don't most people think that being rich is what will make them happy?"

Ron smiled again. This was going to be a good day. The girls washed away all thoughts of the previous night like they were bugs that were stuck on his windshield and they had an incredibly powerful squeegee and just slid them away like easy stains on glass.

"Once you get on that bandwagon though, it might be hard to stop," said Ron. "Mac was happy. He was loyal. He was living comfortably. Why did he need more?"

"Cause his wife was a witch with a b," said Imelda.

Ron wondered if she had made the reference to calling Lady Macbeth a witch on purpose or if she had just stumbled into it. Then a thought hit him and it silenced him. "Let's listen for a moment," he said and started the play.

It didn't matter if it was on purpose. How many thoughts had he stumbled into? They were still his thoughts. Afterwards he would reflect upon them and think 'damn, how did I think of that?' but he had grown to accept that it was what happened to him while he was being Mr. Tuck in front of his classroom. Maybe it was the same for them. And then the refrain, 'Time and place and people' went through his mind again and he stopped the recording perfectly at the end of the scene.

Chapter 43

When Ron got home that afternoon, he heard his phone ringing as he climbed the stairs. By the time he had gotten inside the door it had stopped. He put down his bag and took off his coat and then it started ringing again.

"Hello."

"Ronald," said a low and husky voice. "This is Lois."

Ron's brow furrowed. "Yes," he said tentatively.

"Your mother is in the hospital. She's had a heart attack."

A cold rush like ice water flushed through his body and then he felt his face starting to get hot. "Where is she?"

"Mountainside."

"I'm on my way."

He drove like traffic signals and speed limits didn't matter. He had one thought and it pounded in his head. Get there! Get there! He parked his car in the Emergency Room parking area and ran into the hospital. He had forgotten his jacket but didn't feel the cold. His face was flushed and his eyes were darting in one direction after the other. He went to the desk.

"I just heard that my mother has had a heart attack," he said breathlessly to the matronly woman with white hair who sat in back of the desk.

"What is the patient's name?" she said without showing any kind of emotion. Ron hated her instantly.

"Marjorie Bombasco," said Ron, biting the words off and showing his teeth.

The woman leafed through the pages of a notebook and then the phone rang and she stopped to answer it. Ron gripped the counter hard, his fingers turning white. Then he saw Lois standing at the other end of the hall and started running towards her. People's heads turned as he raced by. The security officer started to move in his direction but Ron had already reached Lois and stopped.

"They're bringing her upstairs," Lois said. She was fighting back tears and losing the battle.

"What do they say? Who is the doctor?"

Ron felt a hand on his shoulder and whirled on the security guard.

"What?" he said. His fists clenched.

The guard looked passed him to Lois. "Is everything ok, Ma'am?"

Ron shrugged his shoulder away from the grip.

"His mother just had a heart attack," said Lois.

The guard nodded and took a step back away from Ron. "You have to calm down, Sir. You aren't going to do your mother or yourself any good by getting all riled up."

Ron tried to get hold of himself. He nodded. "OK, OK," he said.

"Ronald, she wants me to go home and get her some things. She is very scared. I told her that you would be here."

Ron looked around as if he could find his mother in one of these rooms. Everything was moving very fast.

"Sir," said the security guard. "Just take a moment before you run upstairs. You look pretty upset and you don't want your mom to be frightened by the sight of you."

Ron took a long deep breath and forced himself to relax and to breathe. Then he said, "She couldn't possibly be any more frightened than she is right now."

The Cardiac Care Unit or CCU was for intense care. Ron found Marjorie lying on her back, the hospital bed raised in the back, staring at the machines that depicted the regularity of her heartbeat, her blood pressure and a number of other things that Ron did not understand. She looked up at him with the face of a frightened little girl, her eyes wide with wonder and terror. She did not smile when she saw him but tears started rolling down her cheeks. "Bruzzer," she said, "look what happened to me."

"How did this happen, Mom?"

"I don't know. I was at the ceramics shop. I have been so nervous lately I had this pain in my chest and I told Bumpy that I thought that I needed to go to the hospital." She stopped and looked into his face. "I don't like it here. I want to go home."

"I know," said Ron, sitting down on a chair next to the bed, "but we can't do that right now. You need to be here, but I'll stay with you." He reached out and took her left hand. She squeezed his fingers weakly.

"I don't want to be like this," she said and a sob came out of her chest.

It frightened Ron. His mother's fears were always her worst enemy. And hospitals were one of her nightmares. "But Mom, it's important to be smart right now. I know how upset you are. You know that I know."

She looked at him and nodded in understanding. He had been her partner when she went through the hardest times of her adult life. Maybe he had only been a boy for most of them, but they had forced him to accept certain responsibilities and roles and she had grown to trust him and she needed someone to trust right now and he was one of the only people in the world who filled the bill.

"Do you know the name of the doctor who is treating you?"

She shook her head. "When we left the store, we couldn't get the car out. It was blocked in by people who had double parked. We blew the horn over and over but no one came out. You know how that neighborhood is."

Ron nodded and cursed the neighborhood silently. The loudmouthed jerks who parked wherever they wanted because some Uncle or Cousin knew somebody who would make everything right if there was ever any trouble.

“Finally, someone came out and by then the pain was so bad. It hurt so much, Bruzzer.” She began to sob again.

Ron squeezed her fingers and said, “OK, I understand.”

“When we finally did get out, we drove to Dr. Gunders office and he saw me right away but he said that he thought that I was having a heart attack and that I should get to the hospital.”

Ron snorted. “He didn’t call an ambulance?”

“No ambulance,” she said shaking her head from side to side on the pillow and then she caught sight of the monitors again and just stared at them.

Ron understood immediately. The doctor had wanted to get an ambulance but she had gotten so upset that he thought it was worse to upset her in the condition that she was in. So he had told her to drive to the hospital. To Ron’s way of thinking, he should have gone along with her, but he knew that was expecting too much.

“When I got here, they took me right away and now I’m here.”

“And this is a good place for you to be. It’s a good hospital and they have good doctors. It isn’t Clara Mass, where you can get on the staff by being somebody’s whatever.”

Marjorie nodded.

Dr. Jacob Gutberg appeared in the doorway and looked at Ron and then at Marjorie. He was a short bald man with dark glasses a white coat and a pocket protector from which stuck a number a single slender silver pen. He moved to Marjorie and said softly, “How are you feeling?”

Marjorie smiled and took a breath. She tried to laugh. “I’m very scared, doctor.”

“I can understand that Mrs. Bombasco but we’re going to get you all better and on your feet in no time as long as you are able to do as we say.”

“I just want to go home, doctor.”

“I’m afraid that isn’t possible right now. You know that you have had an episode. We think that it might have been a heart attack. What a heart attack means is that a little piece of your heart stopped working. The rest of your heart took over and right now your heart is working fairly well considering what it has been through, but we are going to keep you in this unit for the next few days to monitor you and to make sure that your heart is doing what it should be doing to heal itself.”

“And then I can go home?”

"Then we can begin to talk about what treatment options we have, Mrs. Bombasco. This is a serious situation and the hospital and I would not be doing our jobs correctly if we sent you home right now. It would not be in your best interest." Marjorie nodded. The tears began rolling down her cheeks again. Ron looked at her and then over at the doctor. They made eye contact.

"Are you a relative?"

Marjorie spoke before Ron was able to say anything. "This is my son, Ronald."

"Good to meet you Ronald. I'm doctor Gutberg. I was on duty when your Mom came in. Do you know if she has a cardiologist?"

"No," said Ron, "just a regular doctor."

Jacob Gutberg raised his eyebrows. "Well she is going to need a cardiologist now. Mrs. Bombasco, we've given you something for the pain but maybe we should give you a sedative to help to calm you."

"I don't want to lose control."

The doctor smiled. "You won't lose control of anything. You will just feel more relaxed. Being frightened will more likely cause you to lose control than being calm."

Ron liked the doctor's approach. He was straightforward and at the same time soothing.

"Have you ever taken tranquilizers?"

"I took Librium 10 for a long time, but not recently," said Marjorie.

"Ok, that's an old drug. We will give you something very much the same only a bit more up to date."

When the doctor stepped out into the hallway, Ron followed him.

"How is she, doctor?"

"It's too soon to tell but what I said about the next couple of days is important. Sometimes one of these attacks is followed by a second one. When she gets through the next 48 hours, I will be more confident."

"Could she die?"

"There are, as I'm sure that you know, fatalities connected with heart attacks. We have to just wait and see."

Ron stayed with her and they talked about familiar topics and told old stories. The time that she had wanted to go down to the shore and had started getting nervous before they even got on the parkway and how he talked to her and soothed her and talked her exit by exit, telling her that she could turn off again in just a couple of miles if she needed to but that she was doing so well and that she could get there. How he told her that she could do it and that after a while that she had

believed him and heard nothing but his voice as he kept it up. Kept talking to her mile after mile, telling her how brave she was and how much he loved her. Marjorie smiled and closed her eyes and pretended that she was in the car with him again. He held her hand and then he told the stories about how he used to meet her after work every night. She asked him to tell her about some of the movies that they saw together.

"I remember that you used to get great movie passes and we would go to Woolworths and buy sandwiches and sneak them into the movies. I remember that when we saw West Side Story we sat in the front row of the balcony. We ate our sandwiches and watched the huge screen and the way that the movie started with the helicopter and the different buildings and then the playground and the guy snapping his fingers."

She squeezed his hand. "You've got some memory."

"Those were very happy times," said Ron. "But we were so poor, Mom. We weren't even sure that we could make the rent on the apartment and here we were going to the movies."

"We were poor but we had fun and we enjoyed each other's company so much. I wanted to be with you more than I wanted to be with anyone in the world. I never treated you like a little boy. Who could treat you like a little boy with that brain and that vocabulary?"

Ron laughed and patted her hand. "My brain didn't make me older, Mom."

"But it made it feel like you were older. I could talk to you about anything and you understood."

It was dark by the time that Lois came back with her things. Ron had watched as she picked at her dinner and made faces at the taste of everything. Lois went through the list of the things that she had gotten for Marjorie.

Then Lois said, "George was at the house."

Ron's face hardened. "Did you tell him?"

Lois nodded. "Yes, he said that he hoped that you felt better."

Marjorie began to weep again. Ron said, "That's not going to help anything Mom."

Marjorie said, "Why does he have to be such a cold hearted bastard?"

Lois said, "That just what he is, that's all."

Ron said quietly, "Listen Mom, it's getting late. I have to go and you should rest. I'll be back in the morning."

"What about work?" said Marjorie.

"I'm gonna take the day off. I haven't taken a sick day since I started there."

"Don't get into trouble Bruzzer."

"There won't be any trouble," said Ron.

He kissed her goodnight. Lois said that she was going to stay with her until they made her leave. Ron nodded.

Chapter 44

Ron saw George's car parked in front of the house and let himself in with his key. He found George standing in the bathroom shaving. He had a suit laid out and had just taken a shower.

George came out of the bathroom with shaving cream still on his face. He saw Ron and said, "Oh... How's your mother?"

"You really are a miserable piece of shit aren't you," said Ron.

"Don't start with me, Ronald."

"Don't start with you?" Ron moved towards him. "Don't start with you? My mother is lying in the cardiac care unit and you really don't give a fuck at all, do you?"

George went back into the bathroom. "I don't have to explain myself to you."

"You coldhearted, worthless fuck. The doctor isn't even sure that she is gonna live!"

George stopped shaving. "I didn't know it was that serious."

Ron sprang for him and George backed into the bathroom and shut the door. Ron pounded against it. He beat his fists on it. "You were a worthless piece of shit when she met you. If it hadn't been for her, you'd still be in debt to the goddamned bookies. She should have let one of them put a fucking bullet in you instead of paying off your gambling debts."

George snarled and threw the door open. He shoved Ron back against the kitchen table. Ron picked a chair and swung it at him. George held up his arm and screamed as it hit him. And then he went into his pocket and pulled out a knife. Ron stopped and stared at it. Then he scrambled towards the kitchen drawer and George yelled.

"Open that drawer and I'll put this right in your back."

Ron whirled on him and saw that George had moved after him. He stared at the blade of the knife and then into George's face. It was bloated red with rage. His arm and face were bleeding from where the chair had caught him.

"Just go out and fuck your whore, you pitiful excuse for a man."

"Get the hell out of here right now, before I lose my temper," said George. "Go on. Get out! And leave your key."

"Fuck you," said Ron. "It's my mother's house. You never would have been able to get it without her and you left."

"Get out," snarled George.

Ron was breathing hard when he got back into his car. He knew that he was enraged when he went there, but the level of his own violence surprised him. He drove across Ridgewood Avenue and turned down Bay Street and then onto the street where his father lived. The street looked unfamiliar in some way and then Ron realized that it had been made a one way. He parked in front of his father's house, went to the door and rang the bell. He was nervous. He was always on edge between the times that he rang that bell and the time that the door opened. He was not sure that he understood why. Because he had not been around his father. He did not know what kind of car that he drove or whether he was home. There was a car parked in the driveway, but it looked too old to be something that his father would be driving.

Harry Tuck smiled when he saw his son standing on the porch. Maybe the visit to Marjorie's house had been worthwhile. Ron did not return the smile. He held out his hand and realized for the first time that his knuckles were bleeding. Harry shook his hand without mentioning the blood.

"Dad, I know that I should have called first, but I really needed to see you."

"You don't have to call," said Harry. Then he looked over his shoulder and said, "Betty look whose here."

Betty Tuck gave Ron a look that he knew was her attempt at a smile but it came onto her face like a grimace. "Hello Ronald. Come on in. Would you like some coffee?"

"Maybe some other time," said Ron. He wanted to be polite, but he did not want a social gathering and he needed to talk to his father alone.

"Alrighty," she said.

Harry was a clever man and he knew that his son had been raised to be polite. It worried him that he has refused the cup of coffee. "Why don't we go out onto the back porch?" he said.

Betty made herself scarce. She went down into the basement to fold clothes that had just come out of the dryer. She figured that Ron needed money and she hoped that it wasn't a lot because the truth was that things were pretty tight with them right now.

When they settled on the back porch, Ron said, "My mother's had a heart attack. She's at Mountainside Hospital."

"Holy Shit," said Harry. "When did that happen?"

"Today," said Ron. "I just left her. She is the cardiac Care Unit."

"What are they saying?"

The doctor said that he won't really know if she is out of the woods until tomorrow or the next day. He called it a myocardial infarction. I don't know what that means."

"Me either," said Harry.

"Dad, George left her. He is moving out to live with some woman."

Harry was only really surprised that it had taken this long. He knew how difficult living with Marjorie was. Her phobias, her drive, her desire to always have more were not the kind of traits that a man usually signed on for. He shook his head. "I just don't know what to say, Ronald."

"I need a favor," said Ron. He looked into his father's eyes. "You know the kind of effect that you have on her. You always make her feel like a woman."

"I don't know about that," said Harry. "You're mother and I go back a long ways and it's been a very long time since there was anything like that between us."

"I do know about that," said Ron. "She's scared and she looks lost and she needs me, I understand that, but it would help me and her if you could drop in to see her while she is there. Let her know that one of the men in her life cares about her."

"George might think that's pretty strange," said Harry.

"George doesn't give a shit, Dad. He wasn't even going up there to see her."

Harry gestured. "Is that what happened to your hand?"

Ron brought the knuckles to his mouth and sucked them. "Yeah, I shouldn't have lost my temper."

Harry scanned his son's face and was quietly pleased to see that there were no marks on him. "I'll get there tomorrow. But let's keep this between us."

Ron nodded. "Thank you. Thank you very much."

Harry let him out the back door and Ron hurried to the car, not wanting to see his brother or his sister right now.

Ron stopped to get a pizza on the way home and thought about what he still had to do. He wasn't sure how to call in sick. He had never done it before. He hadn't paid enough attention to it when he got the stacks of papers that they handed out on opening day, but he knew where he kept the papers.

Eating a slice of pizza, sitting on his bed, Ron dialed the convent. It was almost 9 o'clock in the evening and he had debated whether or not it was too late.

On the fourth ring, a hushed voice said, "Hello."

Ron was taken aback. He thought that there would be some kind of official greeting, some way that was all their own that nuns answered the phone. "May I speak to Sister Irene Emanuel?" he said.

The voice took an immediate tone. 'And who shall I say is calling her at this hour?'

"My name is Ron Tuck. I'm a teacher at the high school."

"At this high school?"

Ron thought, why do they keep asking me that? Then he said, "Yes Sister."

The tone continued. "Just a moment, I'll see if she is still awake."

Two or three long moments passed. Ron finished his first slice and bit into another. Then he heard Irene Emanuel's unmistakable voice. 'How can I help you, Mr. Tuck?'

"Sister, I'm sorry to disturb you. I think that I lost track of time."

"Yes."

Ron waited for her to say more but there was just silence. 'I won't be coming in tomorrow, Sister.'

"Oh? And why is that?"

"My mother, Sister she's had a heart attack. I'm going to have to be at the hospital."

Then the tone changed immediately. "Ron, I'm so sorry. Is there anything that we can do?"

"No Sister, I'm sorry for calling so late. If you could just remember her in your prayers," he blurted. He wasn't even sure where that had come from.

"Of course we will Ron, and if there is anything else that you need us to do, please don't hesitate to call."

Chapter 45

By the next night Ron was feeling better about his mother. His father had come to visit, as he said that he would, that afternoon. Ron was right about the effect that it had on her. She brightened and did not cry while he was there. He even made her laugh. Harry never mentioned that Ron had come to see him. In the hallway, they shook hands again and Harry said that he would try to stop by most

days. The hospital was very close and Ron suspected that Harry would keep these visits to himself. He was rarely at home and Betty was even more rarely given the privilege of knowing where he was.

Later that afternoon, the doctor stopped by and said that everything was holding steady and that there was no immediate reason for alarm. Jacob Gutberg had agreed to become her cardiologist under one condition: she had to stop smoking cigarettes.

"We'll see about a treatment program to help you with that bad habit once we get you out of here. It isn't an issue right now. There is no way that you could smoke in the hospital."

Ron flashed back on his Aunt Dotty and how the two of them had snuck her out of her oxygen tent and down to the solarium for a cigarette after one of her heart attacks.

"I'm going to schedule you for a cardiac catheterization next week," said Dr. Gutberg.

"What's that?" said Marjorie.

"We run a very, very thin wire into your femoral artery and up to your heart. There is a camera on the end of it. It gives us an opportunity to see any blockages that you might have."

"Will I be awake?"

"No, we'll give you a light general anesthetic. The procedure will only take about fifteen minutes."

"I can't do it," said Marjorie.

"There really isn't anything to be frightened of, Mrs. Bombasco. Early next week, you and I can sit down and I will explain it all to you in detail and you can ask as many questions as you want."

"Doctor, I don't think that I can do it."

"We'll talk about that next week. Just remember that it is the best treatment option that we have to make sure that we are doing everything that we should be doing to help you get well."

It took Ron an hour to calm her back down. He did it the same way that he confronted her agoraphobia. He talked with her using a soft voice and not being at all confrontational. He assured her that if she was not able to do it that there would be other things that they could do.

"What he's talking about isn't a treatment, Mom. It's diagnostic and I'm sure that there are other tests that they can do that do not involve putting you out or giving you any needles."

She held up the arm to which the heparin lock was attached. "Look at how black and blue I am already," she said pitifully.

After he left the hospital, Ron headed straight for the French Maid. It was just getting dark as he got there and the place was almost empty. The girls worked shifts than ran from 12pm-6 pm and from 4 pm -10 pm and from 8 pm -2am. The middle shift was the least desirable because it started fast with the after work crowd and then sometimes was just slow and painful until the last couple of sets when it picked up. But by that time, the girls had been dancing in high heel shoes for a long time and they were really tired. Most of the girls tooted speed or cocaine to keep their energy level up, but eventually their feet just ached and throbbed so much that they did floor work. This entailed lying down on the floor and spreading their legs for the patrons, but at least it got them off their feet and usually it resulted in good tips.

Ron entered to the sound of Fly Like an Eagle and found a good seat. Because of the shape of the stage and the bar that ringed it, some seats were further away than others. There was also a raised perimeter area in the back with tables and chairs, but it had been empty both times Ron went to the place.

The guy who spun the records also acted as an announcer and he introduced each girl as she came out to begin her set. "And let's welcome to your favorite and mine, Emerald."

There was no applause. There were, at times, hoots from some of the guys. When Ron looked up to get his first view of Emerald, his mouth dropped open. She looked just like Robin. She was slender with long straight blonde hair. She had a thin face and high cheekbones. Her breasts weren't as big as Robin's but she had the same legs and the same beautiful ass. Ron couldn't take his eyes off of her. She walked across the stage with an easy rolling glide. She was wearing a tiny red skirt and red pumps and a wisp like red bra that she could get away with because she was small breasted and did not to worry about them popping out. About two minutes into her set, Ron held up his first dollar. She looked at him and gave him a smile and sat down on the stage and swung her legs over the side and came over to him. She teased her nipples with her fingers as she stood in front of him and Ron watched as they hardened for him. He decided to give her two dollars. Five minutes later, he gave her two more and this time she removed her tiny red skirt and laid it next to him on the bar. The G-string was minuscule. By the end of her set Ron had given her \$8. She walked over to him when she was finished and said, "May I have my skirt back?"

Ron looked down at it and saw that it had been sitting on the bar next to him the whole time. He had not taken his eyes off her long enough to even look at it. The girls sometimes perfumed their skirts and the men would sniff them while they watched the girls. "Yeah, of course," he said quickly.

She rested her fingertips on his arm and looked into his eyes. Ron could see why she had chosen the name emerald. Her eyes were a deep green. "Thank you for being so generous," she said and then she was gone.

Ron ordered another glass of wine and waited for her to come back. He watched the other girls disinterestedly. He checked to see how much money he had brought along with him. He had \$30 plus what was on the bar. That meant that he had over \$40. He could afford to stay there. When Emerald came back out, she had changed into a glittery white outfit but still was wearing the red pumps. She stood in front of him and then turned and bent over and shifted from one leg to the other. Ron's eyes were glued to the way that her ass moved as she shifted her weight. Then he saw that she was looking at him from between her legs. He held up two more dollars and she smiled and wriggled off the stage to get it. "Will you have a drink with me when you are finished?" he said.

"This is my last set, sweetie, but tomorrow afternoon I'll be at the Hitching Post in Paterson."

Ron was disappointed but when she said where she would be, it had almost sounded like a date, an invitation. "OK," he smiled. "I'll see you there."

She gave him a curious crooked little grin and pressed his hand against her small breasts when she took the money.

Chapter 46

The hospital was different on Saturday mornings. There were more visitors but fewer staff. There were fewer doctors around and fewer call downs for testing. The doctors tended to make their rounds early in the day, before visiting hours began. Ron wondered if part of the reason was so that they could also avoid family members who not only wanted assurances and promises but firm timetables. The monitors alongside Marjorie's bed were kept permanently covered now. When Doctor Gutberg came in he did not even look at them. He told Marjorie that if all went well that he would have her moved to a regular room on Monday morning. She had told him again that she did not think that she could go through with the test that he wanted to do and asked what other tests were available. He was disappointed but saw that she was stubborn about this and told her about an echocardiogram. After Marjorie was told that nothing was going to be stuck into

her and that she would not have to be anesthetized, she agreed to have the test. The doctor scheduled it for Monday with the plan that if proved to be non-substantial that he would simply have her moved from the testing area to a regular room. He had figured out that this was a very nervous patient who had a history of emotional instability and now he tried to factor that into his decisions, but it annoyed him that such a silly thing was going to get in the way of him treating this patient in the way that he knew was best.

Ron spent the morning with her and they played gin rummy and watched TV and talked.

Ron asked, "Have you heard from George?"

"He sent a card," she said. "He wrote that hopes that I get better soon and that he is staying away because he doesn't want to upset me."

"Why doesn't he realize that his staying away is upsetting you?"

"I don't love him," said Marjorie. "I'm not sure that I ever loved him and I feel very guilty about that."

Ron nodded.

"I just knew that I had to get you out of Newark. That's why I married him." Ron winced. It wasn't the first time that he'd been told that. "I don't know Mom." Marjorie bit her lip. "I'm worried about health insurance now. What if he wants a divorce? What will I do? I'm not going to be able to work for a while and my kind of job does not come with healthcare. And I would never be able to afford the house without him and I just can't imagine having to go back into an apartment."

"Has he mentioned anything about wanting a divorce?"

"Not really, but you know George. I'll find out when he files the papers."

"The only thing that we should be thinking about right now is getting you well," said Ron.

Marjorie put down the cards. "I'm just going to close my eyes for a little while," she said. "I don't sleep at night. I get too frightened when it's dark."

Ron read the newspaper that he'd brought for her and watched her sleep. After about an hour he saw Lois in the doorway and held his finger up to his lips, hoping that she would stay still but she had already began to talk.

"How is she feeling?" said Lois.

Marjorie's eyes blinked open and Ron shot Lois a look that said why couldn't you just be still? Lois ignored him. She moved to the bed and took his mother's hand. Marjorie smiled and said, "I just had a wonderful nap."

Ron said that he was going to go and his mother nodded.

"Will you come back tomorrow?"

Ron had planned on stopping back later that day but said that he would be there.

“Do you think that you could stop at the bakery and bring some jelly donuts?”

Ron said, “Mom, that isn’t a good idea.”

Lois opened the bag that she had brought with her and said, “Look what I have.” It was an old fashioned donut from Dunkin Donuts and a container of coffee. Ron thought that it was good that she was hungry but was horrified that Lois had brought coffee and donuts to a woman who had just had a heart attack.

Marjorie’s face lit up and she sat up in bed. “I’m so hungry. The food that they bring me is terrible. I can’t smoke but to have a good cup of coffee. Did you get it with half and half?”

Lois smiled. “Just the way that you like it.”

Ron’s face tightened as he watched her open the donut bag and put the coffee down on the tray. He struggled to not say anything.

It was just then that one of the nurses walked in to take her temperature. She spied the coffee and donut. “I hope that you aren’t eating that, Mrs. Bombasco.”

Marjorie looked up with her hands outstretched and her face took on the appearance of a little girl who had been caught doing something wrong. “I was just going to have this coffee and donut.”

The nurse gave her a look that Ron was sure would have made Irene Emanuel proud. “You are on a strict diet and you know that. No coffee and no donuts. If you’re hungry I can get you some Jell-O.”

Almost involuntarily Marjorie stuck out her tongue both at the nurse and at the thought of Jell-O. “I’ll keep this at the desk,” said the nurse, gathering the bag and the container. Ron watched his mother’s face sink. “Your visitor can take it with her when she leaves.”

Ron drove down Valley Road towards Paterson. He knew the city from his visits to Quimpy, but he didn’t know a place called The Hitching Post there. As he drove, he conjured up images of Emerald and then right at the end of Valley Road as if by design there it was. When he got out of the car he realized that he already had an erection. He adjusted himself and walked into the bar.

This place was not at all like The French Maid. It looked a bit dingy. There was a bar that was pretty standard looking rectangular with stacks of glasses and bottle in the center island. Off to the left was an area that had a small gate around it. The area was square and about twelve feet by twelve feet. In front of the gate was a

scattering of tables and chairs. Ron looked around while his eyes adjusted to the light. There were two bartenders and about fifteen customers at the bar. Seated at the tables were another eight men. The only women in the bar were the dancers. Ron watched as a guy walked passed him holding two drinks and camped out at one of the tables. He moved towards the bar, decided that was not a place to order white wine and asked for a bottle of beer. His change came back with the standard arrangement of three singles, a five and a ten. He moved to one of the vacant tables. It was in the second row and after a moment he casually slid closer to one of the empty tables that bordered the gate. The dancer was a chubby brunette whose act consisted of squeezing her breasts together and then shaking them back and forth against her arms.

Then he saw Emerald. She came out of the ladies room that also doubled as the dancers' changing area and moved towards the side of the gate. She opened it and stepped in just as the other girl was gathering her boa and skirt and moving out. He thought that Emerald looked tired. She wasn't wearing make-up and in the better light, Ron could see that she had freckles. He liked the scrubbed clean look on her. She also seemed a little thinner to him than she had the night before. When the next song began she moved with an easy glide. Ron tried to catch her eye but she still had not looked in his direction.

When he held up his first dollar bill, she looked towards him and flashed a smile that Ron took as recognition. He smiled back and extended his arm. She took the tip and folded it under the waistband of her G-string so that she was wearing it like a pelt at her belt. She turned and gave him a little wiggle and then resumed dancing. For the most part she was being ignored.

When he gave her the next dollar he said, "At least you don't have to climb down from the stage."

She didn't respond at first as if she hadn't heard him or his comment just hadn't registered. Then he saw the recognition light up her face. "Oh, it's you," she said.

Ron wasn't sure but after that she seemed to dance more and more for him than she did for the other guys. She got a single dollar here and there and for each one she turned and gave her ass that cute little wiggle. Ron grinned broadly as he watched her. When he gave her the fifth tip, this time two dollars, she turned away and bent over until her palms were flat on the floor and then carefully she raised one leg and hooked the heel into the top of the gate's rail so that she was almost completely exposed to him. Then she bent her knee so that she started to slide herself back towards his face. When she stopped the thin fabric of the G-string was

so close to him that he could see a label's imprint on the other side. She moved herself forwards and back. Ron felt his face flush red hot. He stared at the line that her pussy made against the fabric. Then she straightened herself and moved back into her set.

When it was over, she stood close to him at the rail and said, "I'll be at the other side of the bar."

Ron's beer was now gone. Normally he didn't drink beer, but after what Emerald had done, he found himself very thirsty. He had gulped the rest of the bottle down like it was soda.

He got up and moved to the rear of the room and stood against the wall. He stayed there and hardly watched the brunette squeeze and shake her breasts. His eyes glued to the ladies room door. The sight of her crotch still throbbed in his brain.

She came out five minutes later, still wearing the same outfit that she had worn in, the white sparkly one from the night before. He moved to a chair at the empty side of the bar and sat down. When she came over, the bartender did as well.

She slid in next to him and Ron felt her brush her knees along his thigh. The fronts of his pants were tented out. She ordered a white wine and Ron asked for another beer.

"I'm happy to see you again," he said.

She looked down and then back up at his face. "Yeah, you seem happy about it."

Ron blushed. She watched him blush and thought it was cute. "I really didn't expect you to show up here today," she said.

"I told you that I would find the place. I didn't know that it existed."

Emerald looked into his eyes and then formed a smirk. "Yeah, if I believed every guy that said that he was going to come see me dance, I'd be even more of a fool than I am, wouldn't I?"

Ron sat there smiling and said, "Do I look like every guy?"

She leaned close and whispered into his ear, "They mostly don't get hard this fast."

And then she reached between his legs and squeezed. Ron thought that he was going to explode right there. He had the beer bottle up to his lips and almost bit into it. Then she got up and said, "Time for me to dance."

Ron sat there wondering what he should do. He didn't have enough money to sit there all day. He didn't have enough money to invite her out to dinner. He thought she would not appreciate a trip back to his three room cold water flat. His

second beer was empty and now he was feeling the effects of them. There was only one thing to do and he resolved himself. He got up quietly and left.

He scolded himself on the way home. What was wrong with him? It was a world based on money and how could he have been so stupid to think that he could have the vices of that world. He didn't like to drink and now he felt drunk. He didn't have money to waste and now he had spent more in the last two days that he usually spent in a week.

Tutoring! The word blared in his mind like a trumpet. He had forgotten his tutoring appointments. "Fuck!" he screamed and hit the steering wheel. The car swerved and for a second he felt like he was losing control of it. Then it straightened out and he looked into each of his mirrors paranoid that he was going to see flashing lights. Two miles and a two turns later he felt himself settling down. He had intentionally turned off the road that he was on and then turned again to make sure that no one had seen anything in back of him. He was in Montclair, where he had not had the best luck with the cops.

"How could I forget tutoring?" he said aloud in the empty car. Technically his appointments had been in the morning and technically he had been with his mother while he was supposed to be tutoring. So technically he could call and use her heart attack as an excuse. That thought made him sick to his stomach. He would have remembered about the appointments if he hadn't gone out on Friday night. It was the go-go bar, but he couldn't tell anyone that. He was having a hard time telling himself that. Even he wanted to spit on himself for being such a cock driven asshole. What was he doing going to a go-go bar while his mother was in the hospital?

When Ron got home he called the Mooney Residence and explained what happened. Then he called the Devin residence. Mrs. Devin was curt when he apologized for missing the appointment.

"My son waited for you all day. After a while it was pathetic to see him keep going to the doorway and moving the curtain aside to look out."

"I'm sorry," said Ron. "I had an emergency."

"I'd like to know what was so important that you could not find the time to call. I'd like to know so that when I call the school I can explain why I don't wish to have you back here and why I think that you pumping my son up with confidence and then letting him down was mean and careless and hurtful."

"I was at the hospital," said Ron. "My mother has had a heart attack."

He heard Mrs. Devin gasp on the other end of the line. "I'm so sorry. I didn't know."

"I do try to remember that my students are in a fragile way, Mrs. Devin, but I admit I was not thinking about James and it didn't occur to me until I was driving home." In his head he added, from the go-go bar.

Afterwards, he collapsed back down onto his bed and slept for hours.

Chapter 47

"Up until the time that Macbeth kills Duncan, has he done anything wrong?" Ron started his class on Monday morning with a feeling of rededication. Maybe he had stumbled but he would pick himself up and get back on track.

"I don't really like him. He only thinks about himself," said Barbara.

Ron looked at their smooth expectant faces and smiled. They smiled back.

Sonia raised her hand. "Are you feeling better, Mr. Tuck?"

"I wasn't really sick, Sonia. My mom had a heart attack and was taken to the hospital."

The girls' faces in unison turned to instant concern. "Is she going to be Ok?" said Barbara.

"I hope so. I think so. We'll know more after today." He was so tired of saying that she had a heart attack. Part of him still wanted it to be a bad dream. "Macbeth is deeply troubled about killing Duncan and maybe this is a good time to stop for a second and do a little history." Ron moved to the chalkboard. "The real Macbeth lived in the 11th Century. By rights, when the king died, Macbeth had the best chance of succeeding him to be king. But Duncan named his son Malcolm as his successor. Now this was a break from tradition. And it caused a conflict and Macbeth did kill Duncan, but not at his house. In reality, Macbeth was not a bad guy. He was seen as a good prince. But for all the world, since Shakespeare, he has been viewed as a horrible monster. The point is the power of literature is greater than the power of an army. Who remembers that Macbeth was a good guy? Nobody does and nobody cares. They don't care because the Macbeth that Shakespeare created was more interesting than history."

The girls looked confused and Ron sensed that he had made a mistake. He had spent weeks building up Shakespeare and now he had taken him down a peg.

"Why did Shakespeare lie?" asked Barbara.

Ron paced and rolled his chalk between his fingers. "Why do any of us lie?"

Ron stopped and looked at them. "Anybody here never told a lie?"

No one's hand went up and Ron waited. "Ok, so think of a time when you lied and ask yourself why did you do it?"

Connie turned to her friend Barbara and then raised her hand. "To save my...." She stopped and giggled. "To stay out of trouble," she said grinning to Barbara more.

"That's why Shakespeare did it," said Ron. "He wanted to stay out of trouble with the new king. But it was more than that. He wanted to tell a good story and to tell a good story, sometimes the facts get twisted. Sometimes we exaggerate. Sometimes we attribute the thoughts of others to ourselves to make us look good in a story that we are telling."

Imelda's almond shaped eyes glittered as she said, "Do you do that, Mr. Tuck?"

Ron enlarged his eyes in mock shock. "Me? I wouldn't know how to lie to you guys. You'd catch me anyway."

The class laughed and Ron started the tape of the play. He hoped that he had salvaged a little bit of the damage that he had done to Willie.

That night after tutoring and the hospital Ron drove home happy and tired. The test had gone pretty well and no real blockages had been seen. However Dr. Gutberg cautioned that this was not the most reliable test and told Marjorie again that he really needed to do the cardiac catheterization. But Marjorie was feeling less tired and was now in a regular room. Ron felt better about things with the shrouded machines and screens removed, as if it was their presence that announced ominous possibilities.

Tutoring had been smooth. Dennis Mooney had even showed up and had done some work. Ron had gotten new assignments for James Devin and the kid was responding to the tutoring and his desire to please Ron.

Ron stopped for some Chinese food and got coral shrimp which he ate out of the container sitting in his front room and reading papers and listening to music. It was strange to him that when he read, he blotted the sound out but liked the soundtrack in the background. He had learned to be alone again after Zoe had gone to art school. At first it had been difficult. He had grown used to her presence. He loved the daily sex and the games that they played. Now he was relegated to masturbation, but his house was his own and each evening he felt like he returned to a cocoon and was replenished.

Occasionally it occurred to Ron that no one ever called him. There were the crazy silent phone calls from Zoe but they didn't count. Chris never called. Quimpy never called. Warren had never called him once. Ron wondered if these people

were truly his friends. Didn't friends have an interest in you? Weren't they curious to see how you were doing? Maybe he was guilty of the same thing. He had never called April after she had asked him to contact her because she did not have his new number. Ron wondered if the reason that he never called April was that he was pretty certain that he would not be able to sleep with her. He tried to think if there were any girls that he didn't want to sleep with that he had ever phoned. The answer jolted him. There was only one, Laureen. He had thought of her as his friend, but he had written those songs about and depicted her in a cruel and insulting way. He had made her look horrible. And then there was the trouble in Rahway. No wonder that they weren't friends any longer.

His apartment had warmed up by the time that he finished dinner. He was too tired to read anymore. He had just lain down on his bed and turned on the TV when the phone rang.

"Ron, it's Bernadette."

Ron was startled and smiled. "Hi, what's up?"

"I don't know when they are going to announce it, but Irene Emanuel is leaving at the end of the week."

"Leaving for where?"

"She's been sent to South America."

"At this time of year?"

"I know. It's very odd and everything is hush hush. Rita won't even talk to me about it and she tells me everything."

Ron had always assumed that Irene Emanuel was the Mother Superior in the convent. She just seemed to be in charge of things wherever she was. He had found out at the end of last year that the Mother Superior was a tall business teacher named Sister Rita Julia. Rita Julia had never had a conversation with Ron but she always had smiled for him.

"I don't know what to say," said Ron. "I'm going to miss her. She's taught me a whole lot."

"Well, you know that she was never really happy here."

Ron hadn't known that. It was something that had never occurred to him. "Who is replacing her?"

There was a pause and in a whisper Bernadette said, "Sister Donna Maria." There was a tone of disgust in her voice. "She's a dangerous woman. She believes in things that have been out of date for a long time. We're going to have our hands full on the faculty council."

"We'll be fine," said Ron, not knowing what he was in for.

"Can you come in early tomorrow? We can have coffee and talk more about this."

"Absolutely," said Ron.

Ron put down the phone and lay back to watch Monday night football and was quickly asleep. He woke at some point in the middle of the night and turned the snow off the screen and then immediately fell back to sleep.

The next morning he waited for Bernadette to come for coffee but she didn't show up. She walked in just a few minutes before class began and when their eyes met she put a finger to her lips and shook her head almost imperceptibly. They stood together in the hallway as was their custom when the classes changed. Talking like a convict out of the side of her mouth, she said, "I think someone overheard me on the phone last night. Don't say anything to anyone."

The week rolled by with the sameness that winter has: white to gray to black. Macbeth killed Duncan and then he killed Banquo. Marjorie grew stronger and started walking to the bathroom on her own. Harry stopped at the hospital every couple of days and Marjorie never failed to mention it to Ron when he did. Lois started living at Marjorie's house to take care of Chipper. It seemed to Ron that Lois avoided him when he was coming to the hospital.

On Friday afternoon at the very end of the school day, Irene Emanuel came onto the PA system.

"Good afternoon ladies, Sisters, teachers. As some of you know, I have been at Our Lady of The Forlorn for almost six years. It has been my privilege to be your principal and to watch you grow and teach and come to a deeper understanding of God. After today I will be leaving the school. I am very excited about my new assignment in Chile. It is one for which I have waited a very long time. As you may know, it is the end of summer in Chile and I will be taking on the responsibilities of principal at Our Lady of Heavenly Treasures High School in Santiago. I hope that I have done good service to you while I have been here and I will miss some of you very much. Thank you for your kindnesses to me and for the good work that you are doing. This is our good-bye and I would ask that none of you come to the principal's office after school as I will have already left and my replacement is not due to arrive until tomorrow. I trust that you will show her the same respect that you have always afforded me. Please remember me in your prayers as you will always be remembered in mine."

Then she was gone and a few seconds later the bell rang to signal the end of the day. Ron's students left quickly. He sat down at his desk and had the sensation

that he was going to cry. It was then that he realized how much he had loved and respected Irene Emanuel. He thought about his earliest mentor. His Aunt Dottie was long deceased now, but Ron had seen a similarity between them that he had never put together before. It was like he shared a secret with them and that secret had somehow given them confidence in him. He wished that he knew what the secret was. Ron stood up, packed his books and locked his door. He looked across the hall at Bernadette's classroom but it was already locked and dark. He walked across the courtyard and into the other building. The principal's outer office was lit up but her door was closed and no one was around. For the first time the school seemed dreary.

Chapter 48

Ron ate his dinner sitting alongside Marjorie's bed. He'd stopped in the hospital cafeteria to get a couple of sandwiches so as not to make Marjorie feel badly about what she had to eat. He noticed that as he unwrapped his food that Marjorie had not even taken the tin cover off of her meal.

"Aren't you hungry, Mom?"

His mother's face had guilt written all over it. Ron looked over into the waste basket and saw a grease stained bag and some oily waxed paper that had been crumpled. Then he looked back up to his mother. She followed his eyes and her face hardened.

"Don't say anything please. I was so hungry and Lois was kind enough to bring me something."

Ron shook his head. "What did she bring you?"

Marjorie's face lit up. "An eggplant parm from the Town Tavern. They make the best sandwiches."

"Great," said Ron with a disgusted look on his face. "Is she too stupid to realize how dangerous that is for you right now?"

"Don't be a bastard, Ronald. She was just doing me a favor."

"I just want you to get out of here and be healthy."

Her face changed back from combative mother to little girl. "One nice sandwich isn't going to hurt anything and it made me feel better."

"OK," said Ron. "I'm not going to lecture you. But promise me that you won't have her mule that crap in here for you every day, please?"

Marjorie said in a small, guilty voice, "I won't."

He unwrapped his sandwich and began eating. "What did Dr. Gutberg say today?"

"He kept on about that other test. You know who he reminds me of, don't you?"

Ron looked at her with a lack of comprehension. He said nothing but just kept chewing.

"You are smart enough to have been a doctor."

Ron rolled his eyes. "Well it's too late for that now."

Marjorie's face returned to her look of resolve. "You could do anything that you wanted to do, anything that you set your mind to doing."

Ron grinned. "Well obviously you are feeling better. Did my father stop by?"

Marjorie shook her head, "Not today." But the question seemed to trigger a new topic that was brewing inside of her. "Have you heard anything from the other one?"

Ron knew "the other one" was code for Robin. "No Mom, that's over."

"What about the mouse?"

Ron laughed in spite of himself. "She isn't a mouse."

"Well, have you heard from her?"

Ron thought about the silent phone calls. "Not really."

"She's a nice girl Ronald. She just isn't for you."

"Why?"

Marjorie tilted her head to the side. "She's a little girl who needs someone to take care of her and that's not what you want."

Ron wondered if it was what he wanted.

"When are you going to start seeing a nice girl?"

Ron grinned at her. "When I find one."

"There are lots of nice girls who come in the ceramics shop."

"Yeah," Ron said sarcastically, "that would be perfect for me."

"You thought the mouse was artistic."

"Could you please stop calling her a mouse?"

"I think there are some lovely girls who come in there," said Marjorie. "They might even be smart enough for you, if you gave one a chance."

"Do you want me to start talking about the eggplant parm again?" said Ron with a tone of warning.

When Ron left the hospital, he drove down to the French Maid. It had been a solid week of tutoring and he had gotten paid that day. For some reason his father's words echoed in his ears about the difference between Blacks and Whites was that white guys didn't take their paychecks and got to the bars and blow them on Friday nights.

The place was packed and Ron slid into a seat at the far corner of the bar. He ordered his wine and lit a cigarette. There were three girls on the stage and the tall short haired brunette caught his eye. Ron was quite sure that he had never seen anything like her in his life. She had the ability to wrap her ankles in back of her head and she would hold that position and stroke between her legs along the slit of her pussy until her lips puffed and the patrons could see her labial lips outlined against the thin fabric. The move drew noise from the usually very quiet crowd. They whistled and their encouragement seemed to excite her to continue. She began to push the fabric inside of herself with her fingertips. Ron gawked.

When she walked the bar a few minutes later, he gave her two dollars and said, "You were something to see."

She stroked the side of his face with her fingertips and said, "You're cute."

A few minutes later she was standing next to him holding a drink and said, "Want to give a girl a place to sit?"

Ron quickly stood up and offered her his chair. She looked at him quizzically.

"Don't you want me on your lap?"

Ron blushed. One of the guys next to him chuckled and said, "You can sit on my lap, sugar."

Ron sat back down on the barstool and she straddled his knee. He could feel the heat from between her legs through the fabric of his pants. It aroused him and she could feel him hardening.

"So what do you do for a living?"

"I'm a teacher."

She looked at him cautiously. "And what do you teach?"

"English."

"I always loved to read. If things had worked out differently, I wanted to go to college."

"You're young," said Ron.

"I have a kid," she said. "It's not going to happen for me."

"You never know," said Ron. "Things have a funny way of working out."

"You married?"

"No, I'm not. I live alone in a little three room apartment that is not much at all." Ron was embarrassed when he told her this, but to his surprise she smiled.

"Some lucky girl is gonna scoop you right up," she said.

Ron laughed. "Yeah, I'm a real catch."

As the night went on she danced and Ron tipped her while she danced and then without him asking or buying her a drink, she came back to him. Ron looked forward to her sets ending. He felt himself getting drunk but it felt so good to have a girl that he was not really buying want to sit with him.

"So where are you from?" asked Ron.

"Long Island," said the dancer, who he now knew went by the name Julie.

"That's a long ride home."

"Well, I probably won't go home tonight. I am working early tomorrow and I'll stay around here." After she said this she smiled into his eyes. Ron saw the twinkle of a question in her large mascara rimmed eyes and smiled.

During her next set, she seemed to be dancing only for him. She crawled on the stage for him. She turned herself into a pretzel for him. She bent over, looked at him through her legs and smiled and waved at him. Ron felt the room throbbing with sound that seemed to vibrate from the walls and the stage. After her set she went into the dancer's dressing room and then came out with her small valise wearing street clothes and a jacket. The jacket was form fitting leather. She was wearing tight jeans and a pale blue shirt. She stood next to him and pressed against him. "It was nice to meet you."

Ron spoke automatically. "Can I give you a ride somewhere?"

Julie grinned widely and said, "I was hoping that you would ask."

In his car, Ron said, "Where do you want to go?"

Julie gave him her best teasing grin and said, "Where do you live?"

"Bloomfield."

"I don't know where that is," said Julie.

Shrugging, Ron told her that it was about twenty minutes up the highway.

"Isn't that a long ways to drive for a club?"

Ron nodded. "I used to live around here. I like this club. Where are you working tomorrow?"

"Some place called High Heels. It's in Paramus."

"Well," said Ron, "where do you want me to take you?"

She didn't answer. She stared at him in the dark car and Ron turned the key, started the engine and drove towards his house.

"This isn't something that I do all the time," Julie said. "But you are so nice and easy to talk to that you just charmed the pants right off of me."

Ron slid her arm along the back of the bench seat and she curled herself into him and brought up her knees and closed her eyes. Very soon she was asleep in the cradle of his arm as he drove home hoping that he had not committed some really stupid blunder.

He showed her the bathroom and she took a very long shower. She came out wrapped in a towel. Ron was lying on the bed. The stereo was playing jazz, Bill Evans piano and Miles Davis on trumpet with John Coltrane on sax for the Kind of Blue album that had become a classic. He was still dressed and lying on top of the bed covers.

"Will you be nice to me?" she said in a soft voice as she lay down next to him. "I don't want it rough tonight, just easy and sweet, ok?"

She snuggled into him and began to undo his pants and then his zipper and then she had his cock out and was massaging it. Ron was more than ready and his penis stood up for her straight and hard and very hot. She covered him with her mouth and said, "You don't have to do nothing baby. Just relax and enjoy."

She moved her mouth up and down on him and Ron slid his fingers through her short hair. He had never been with a girl who had short hair before. When she began to massage his prostate Ron bucked his hips hard. He had never felt anything like that before and it was overwhelming. She felt him expand and lifted her face away and moved on his cock like it was a pump. She didn't have to wait long. Having watched her all night and now the scent of her and then feel of her naked and in his bed along with that incredibly wonderful and wicked things that she was doing in back of his scrotum and right below his anus made his shoot like an uncorked bottle of champagne. Afterwards she grinned at him and said, "That was healthy." Ron wasn't able to speak. He felt his body purring.

"It must be so difficult for you guys to sit there and watch us do what we do and not have any way to relieve the pressure."

Later she produced a condom from her purse and handed it to Ron. "Now," she said, "you'll be able to take your time."

Ron wanted her to get into that pretzel position but he was afraid to ask about it. The night was going so well and he didn't want to remind her of how they had met. He did take his time and she showed him how much she appreciated it. She did things with her abdominal muscles that were incredible. She could make her hard lean belly flutter against him while he was inside of her. She could squeeze

him so tightly with her legs that he was sure that he would have had trouble pulling out of her. The last thing he wanted to do was pull out of her.

This time Ron had remembered to call his tutoring appointments. He changed them till the afternoon and they spent the morning in his bed naked and drinking coffee and exploring each other's bodies. Then he drove her to Paramus.

"Thanks for letting me stay," Julie said.

"Do you want to give me your number?" asked Ron.

"Why?" she said.

"So I can call you.

"Why would you call me?" said Julie.

Ron looked at her and felt flustered. Julie took his hands, turned towards him and smiled.

"You are very nice. I have a kid. I have a boyfriend who helps me to take care of my kid. Let's see this for what it was. I was hot for you and you wanted me too. Now, we go our separate ways."

Ron felt a mixture of disappointment and relief. He knew that she was right. He just never expected her to say it.

Chapter 49

On Monday after noon the staff gathered in one of the classrooms for their first getting to know you meeting with Sister Donna Maria. Ron got there a little late because at first he went to the convent but when no one answered the door he made his way back to the high school main office. He saw a hand written sign on the principal's office that directed him to where the faculty meeting was being held. Ron wondered why the new principal hadn't come over the PA to either introduce herself to the students that day or to tell the faculty where the meeting was going to be. He had spent a good part of the day telling students that he didn't know when they asked him questions about what the new principal was like. When he arrived at the classroom, he saw that all of the nuns were seated on one side of the room and the lay teachers were on the other side of the room. Ron slid into desk towards the back of the room. Sister Vincent Salvatore turned around to him and held up a 4"by6" index card that had her name written on it and which had been creased down the middle so that it would stand up. "We have assigned seats," she said happily.

Lifting his head, Ron saw that there was an index card on an empty desk in the first row, on the lay faculty's side of the room and moved towards it. Sure

enough, there was his name printed in block letters: Mr. Ronald Tuck, 2nd year, English. He slid down into the chair and looked up at the nun who was standing with her eyes closed and swaying slightly back and forth in front of the room. Ron saw that her lips were silently moving.

The physical appearance that she made could not have been more different from Irene Emanuel. Irene was tall and stately. Donna Maria was short and plump. Irene Emanuel moved with a flowing grace. Donna Maria shuffled. Irene Emanuel's skin was very white and it seemed to Ron almost powdered. Donna Maria had a reddish splotches at her cheeks and on her forehead.

As the faculty watched, Donna Maria lifted her crucifix from her chest and pressed it into her splotchy forehead as her eyes remained closed and she continued to silently mumble. Ron looked at her in bewilderment and then his eyes sought out Bernadette who was staring daggers at her new principal. When she felt Ron's eyes on her she gave him a quick eye roll and went back to her stare.

"I want to thank the Lord Jesus, the blessed Mother, our Holy Father, all of the saints and those dedicated souls in heaven who have brought me to be with you." Ron felt his stomach begin to flip. "When I first learned of my mission here, I fell right to my knees and prayed that I would be worthy of the honor that was being bestowed upon me, an honor and a challenge to help bring the young ladies of this parish closer to God. To help keep them turned away from the devil's temptations in this world and to perhaps even send the most worthy to the mother house as novitiates." Ron felt his stomach flip again. What the hell was she talking about?

"I have prayed over the weekend so that I could appear here confident of my choices." Silently, Ron wondered if perhaps someone else could have prayed for her to have gotten into some debilitating and non-fatal accident on the way there. "As you can see, I have assigned each of you a seat and given you a name card. Please remember to bring your name cards to each of our faculty meetings. We will have those meetings in a designated classroom every two weeks for the remainder of the year, so that I can become more familiar with each of you and the good work that you are doing. The host teacher will be told a couple of days in advance so that she can have her classroom prepared for visitors. That way," she clapped her hands together with enthusiasm, "we can all see the pretty decorations that you have hung up and perhaps get ideas from each other. The convent is the home and refuge of the sisters and it did not seem right to me to continue to have the faculty meetings there. However, on special occasions, I am hopeful that we can all meet and pray together in the convent." Ron took a mental snapshot of his room. Except

for the Lincoln portrait and a skeleton that he had hung at his door at Halloween and never taken down, there were no decorations.

Then she stopped suddenly. "Does anyone have a question?"

Ron wondered what anyone could possibly ask about other than if she was out of her fucking mind. He looked around and to his shock there were two hands in the air.

Vincent Salvatore said, "I would just like to say how happy we are to have you here and to ask if perhaps I could possibly help choosing the rooms for the meetings?"

Donna Maria clasped her hands at the side of her left ear and said, "Of course you can help, Sister. I am going to need everyone's help."

Ron was almost shocked to see that Doris had her hand in the air. "I'd just like to volunteer to bake some cookies for the next meeting." His mouth fell open.

"Of course you can and I hope that others volunteer for other meetings."

Now Ron was seriously nauseous. He put his head down and closed his eyes. Donna Maria saw this gesture and assumed that Ron was praying. She moved towards him with a shuffling burst of evangelic fervor and places fingertip on his desk. "I ask for guidance all day long as well, Mr. Ron."

Ron looked up into her eyes and said slowly and he hoped without obvious sarcasm, "I'm sure that you do, Sister Donna."

She smiled and said, "Sister Donna Maria, please."

Then she shuffled back and said, "For now, everything else will stay as it is. Change will come slowly but it will surely come."

As they left the classroom, Ron felt a hand on his shoulder. Sister Rita Julia smiled and said, "Ron, can we walk together?"

"Of course, Sister."

"Irene Emanuel thought the world of you Ron and told more than once that you had the makings of a great teacher. At first I disagreed with her and thought that you were misplaced, but I have come to see that she was right. Sister Donna Maria has a good heart. Give her a chance to show it to you."

"I'll try, Sister."

"I know that you spoke to Irene Emanuel often about teaching. Although we have not been close, I'd like to tell you that my door is always open to you."

"Thank you, Sister. I would like to get to know you better."

"Sister Donna Maria has asked me to take her place on the Faculty Council for the rest of this year, so I am sure that we will, Ron."

The next day Sister Donna Marie appeared with a bag of Cheese Doodles. She made her way along the corridor offering a Cheese Doodle to each of the girls who passed her in the hallway. For each Doodle that she gave out she also ate one. For those that lingered, there were what Sister Donna Marie called a golden moment where they clasped hands and she crushed the Doodle bag between them and they closed their eyes together and gave silent praise to the Lord and to the Virgin. Some of the girls watched agape. Others seemed to enjoy the contact and ate their Cheese Doodle like a host.

Unfortunately, Sister Donna Marie also had the habit of kissing the girl tenderly on the cheek after they concluded their worshipful reverie and this left a slight orange mark from the Cheese Doodle. By noontime, Ron's sophomores pointed out the girls who had been "Doodled" by Sister Donna Mary, forever to be known among them now as Sister Cheesy.

In the hall at the end of the day, Bernadette said to Ron in her side-mouth way of speaking that she always used with him now. "It's going to become a circus here."

"Let's just make sure they don't put us in the cages," said Ron.

Chapter 50

"George came to see me."

Marjorie was sitting up in bed. She was able to shower now and she had done combed in hair the way that she liked it and she was wearing her own pajamas.

"That took long enough," said Ron.

"He wants to come back home. He said that he misses being there and that he's given up the woman."

"What happened? She get sick?"

Marjorie's face looked shocked. "How did you know?"

Ron felt his fists tighten. "You've got to be kidding. I was just being sarcastic."

"Ronald what am I supposed to do? It's his home and his money. He works very hard."

Looking at his mother tenderly, Ron saw that she was trying to make the very best of things. She was stuck and feeling more vulnerable that perhaps she had ever felt in her life. Harry was good for a visit or two but he had made his own life

and this was Marjorie's life. "Whatever you want to do, Mom. I'll be as supportive as I can be."

Marjorie looked at her son and Ron realized that something that he did not like was coming. She had that look. He had seen it before and he recognized it. "He wants you to apologize to him."

"For what?"

"I don't know," she said shaking her head. "I guess the two of you argued after I got sick."

Ron was literally speechless. He didn't want to upset her. He wanted her to get well. He didn't want to live with her. That was a trap from which he would never be able to escape. "OK, let me think about it," was all that he finally could manage.

When he got home, he felt dejected and exhausted. He had wanted to ask his mother if George had apologized to her. He had wanted to flat refuse to do anything but kick George in the balls the next time that he saw him. None of that would have been productive. Dr. Gutberg had explained that stress was one of Marjorie's biggest dangers and Ron was determined not to up the stress level. Maybe he would take the approach that George took. He would do nothing and buy time. It was going to be at least two weeks until his mother came back home. He at least had that long to figure out what to do. Inwardly, Ron shrugged to himself. Maybe he should just say he was sorry. They would both know that he didn't mean it. What difference would it make? Why did he so rebel at the thought of it?

The phone rang. Charlie Rothstein's voice was gravelly.

"Ronnie, Charlie Rothstein. What's the soonest that you can get up to my office tomorrow?"

"What's wrong Charlie?"

"The Devin family is dead. Seems the father came home, shot the mother, shot the kid and then shot himself."

"Holy Shit!"

"You were there yesterday, right?"

"Yeah late afternoon, let me check." Ron opened his book bag turned to his log sheet. "In the afternoon from 3:30 to a little after 5pm."

"That was lucky," said Rothstein. "You missed the old man by less than an hour. Anyway, the cops want to talk to you. Looks like you were the last person to see them alive."

"Fuck!" said Ron.

"It's even more fucked up than that. I'll tell you more tomorrow. The Superintendent wants to meet with you and me and Quimpy before you go to see the cops."

Ron felt an instant of panic. "Ok."

"You aren't in any trouble. Don't be worried. The Sup just wants to have an idea of the big picture before you talk to the cops. Any way that you could make it a little earlier?"

"I'll do my best," said Ron.

"Well we'll be waiting on you so the sooner that you can get here the better. Good night kid."

Chapter 51

The Superintendent's office was wood paneled and had an Indian Design carpet over the institutional carpeting that lined all the offices. Ron had thought of calling Quimpy before the meeting but decided against it. Things between them were not the same since Zoe. Ron had left work at the bell for one of the first times that he could remember. He had cancelled his appointment with Dennis Mooney and driven straight up to the school. He managed to get there by 3:15 and was proud of himself.

There was a large mahogany desk in the middle of the room, a brown leather couch against one of the walls and three leather backed chairs arranged in front of the desk. There was a portrait on the wall over the Superintendent's head of John F Kennedy.

Bob O'Neil was a large man with prematurely white hair and a red nose. He did not stand when Ron and Charlie came into the room and at first he did not speak. Quimpy was sitting on the couch with one leg crossed over his knee and his arm extended along the back of the couch. There was a yellow legal pad on his lap and a pen in his hand. Ron blinked for a second. The appearance that Quimpy made here was so much different than the one that he made at his apartment or at the bowling alley.

Charlie ushered Ron to the middle seat and sat on the window side of him. Quimpy did not stand up and fill in the other seat and he did not greet Ron.

"Alright Charlie, how did all this mess start and what is our involvement?"

"None that I can see," said Charlie. "Everybody here knows the story with the kid. No sense of going over that again. Ron here had been tutoring him for about a month."

O'Neil turned his gaze to Ron. "Kid ever talk to you about his father?"

"Not directly," said Ron. "He talked to me about feeling like a weirdo and not wanting to ever go back to the school and not wanting to ever go out of his house."

O'Neil gave no sign as to whether Ron's answer had been satisfactory. "Was the mother always there when you met the kid?"

"She was always in the house. She never came down into the basement, which is where we worked. We always had a brief conversation before I left."

What about?" said O'Neil.

"Just how Jim was doing. Lately she asked about my mom. I had to cancel an appointment when my mom had a heart attack and she was angry about the cancellation until she found out why."

Ron knew that it was the first time Quimpy had heard about his mom. He saw it register on his face. They had been friends of sorts with him bringing back blankets from Mexico that his mother had bought, and they had talked about selling them from her ceramics shop and making a good profit.

O'Neil just moved to the next question. "Did she ever mention her husband?"

"No, never."

"Did she ever mention the school at all?"

"Not really."

"Don't give me not really," said O'Neil. "Did she mention the school or not?"

Ron looked into Bob O'Neil's eyes and thought a moment and it came to him that this was only about the school's exposure. Should the school have known anything? Had he been told anything that he should have relayed to the school? "I don't recall her ever mentioning the school."

O'Neil looked over at Quimpy and smiled. "You said this one would understand."

Charlie broke in. "It's not that we don't give a shit about James Devin" he said to Ron, "but there's nothing that we can do for him now and this is a big story in the papers."

O'Neil pointed his finger at Ron. "Which you aren't talking to. In fact you aren't talking to anyone outside this room other than the cops. After your interview with the police," O'Neil looked at Charlie and then at Quimpy, "which one of you should he call?"

"He can call me," said Quimpy. "Charlie, you're busy tonight right?"

Charlie nodded. "Yeah, we can talk in the morning."

"Alright," said O'Neil. "Call him," pointing at Quimpy. Keep your answers short and to the point. Don't offer any information that might be considered personal about James Devin and certainly nothing that you might have been told about his father. If you are uncomfortable for any reason, conclude the interview and tell the police that you would like to have the school's attorney with you when you resume."

"Why would I need a lawyer?" said Ron. He felt color drain from his face. His heart began beating faster. He wondered if there was something else about this that he wasn't being told.

"I have no fucking idea," said Bob O'Neil. "Did you ever talk to anyone about James Devin?"

"Only Charlie and Quimpy." Ron decided that mentioning his mother would not make them happy and would serve no useful purpose.

"OK," said O'Neil. "Anyone have any questions?"

Quimpy and Charlie shook their heads. Ron was silent but he wanted to ask questions. He would wait until he talked with Quimpy. He looked at Quimpy.

"Should I call you tonight?"

"Yeah," said Quimpy. "You still have the number, right?"

Ron nodded.

The police station was smaller than he expected it to be. He didn't know that it was one of five satellite stations they were at the far ends of the city with the main station centrally located. Ron was ushered to the shared desk of Detectives Humbolt and Garvey.

"Thanks for coming in," Ned Garvey.

Ron nodded. He didn't realize that he had a choice.

"What exactly was your relationship to the Devin family?" said Garvey.

Humbolt sat off to his partner's right with a pad and a pencil. Garvey did not take his eyes off of the interviewee. Ron instantly wondered if they knew that he smoked pot. He could not help himself. He felt his chest tighten a little bit and then he said, "I'm James Devin's tutor."

"Did they hire you?"

"No, I was assigned by the school district to provide bedside instruction."

Humbolt's eyebrows went up as he wrote. "And what exactly is bedside," he emphasized the word, "instruction?" said Garvey.

"When a student is going to miss more than two weeks of school, he is assigned a home instructor."

"Who assigned you?"

"Charlie Rothstein."

"And who is Charlie Rothstein?"

"He's the school psychologist."

Humbolt wrote furiously and after each answer Garvey paused to make sure that his partner was getting everything. "Why wasn't James Devin in school?"

"My understanding was that he was school phobic," said Ron. "But I think he generally didn't leave his house at all."

"And why was that?" said Garvey.

Ron's head started to whirl. What should he say? "He and I didn't talk about that."

"Did you talk about it with anyone else?" said Garvey.

Ron scolded himself. He should not have said anything about him not leaving the house. He heard O'Neil's voice in his head saying keep your answers short. Don't volunteer anything. Instantly his mind flashed on Jackie Gleason from the Honeymooners wailing, "I'm a blabbermouth. A big blabbermouth."

"When I was assigned, I was told that he had family issues and that he was going to be with me for the rest of the year and that the school was hoping to get him counseling."

He was fucked. He knew it. Counseling for what would have naturally been the next question and Ron almost started to answer it figuring fuck them why should he get himself in trouble over this.

But Garvey said, "OK, let's get to the day of the shooting. What time did you arrive?"

"About 3:30."

"Was that your normal arrival time?"

"Yes."

"And how long were you scheduled to stay?"

"Until 5:30."

The Detectives exchanged a look. Garvey said, "Do you remember whether there was a car in the driveway?"

Ron closed his eyes and tried to picture it. He saw himself park on the street in front and walk up to the side of the house through the driveway. There was no car. "No, I remember there was no car because I walked up the driveway to the side door."

"Why didn't you use the front door?"

"The side door was closest to the basement and that was where James was."

"How did you know that he was in the basement?"

"That's where he always was. That's where we worked."

"Who answered the door?"

"James did."

"Did he look unusual in any way?"

"What do you mean?" said Ron. His mind flashed on the black toenails.

"Anything out of the ordinary?"

Ron shrugged. "Not that I noticed."

"Was Mrs. Devin there?"

"Yes, she was in the kitchen. She called down to me."

"Do you remember what she was wearing?"

"I didn't actually see her. I heard her voice."

"Was Mr. Devin there?"

"I never met Mr. Devin. I don't think that he lived there."

Ron almost bit his lip when he added that. Gleason again moaning, "A big blabbermouth!"

Garvey leaned forward. "Why didn't he live there?"

"I don't know."

"How did you know that he didn't live there?"

"James told me."

"But he didn't say why?"

"No, he just said that his father didn't live there anymore."

"And you never met Mr. Devin?"

"No," Ron could feel himself sweating now. He thought Jesus if I had actually done anything wrong, I'd be confessing.

"Did you ever talk to him on the phone?"

"No."

"And you said that you stayed until 5:30?"

"I finished up a little early, maybe 5:15."

"And then you left?"

"Yes."

"Did you see, Mrs. Devin before you left?"

"No and that was unusual. Usually she wanted to know how James was doing and asked me to talk with her before I left, but that day when I called up that I was leaving there was no answer, so I just left."

The two detectives looked at each other and nodded. "Thanks for coming in Ron. If we have any other questions, we will need your name address and phone number so that we can contact you."

Ron felt queasy giving them the address but he didn't have a choice and he reminded himself that he hadn't done anything wrong. He felt a rush of relief when he got back into the car. He wondered if he had looked nervous.

"Quimpy, it's Ron."

"Hey man, what's happening?"

"I just got home from the police station."

"Yeah?"

"I think it went well. I was nervous a few times but they didn't ask the really hard questions."

"What really hard questions? You didn't shoot them did you?"

Ron felt slapped in the face. "No, but they didn't ask what I had been told about Devin's father or who told me. That seemed to be what O'Neil was worried about."

"Yeah, there were privacy issues. Charlie got his ass chewed out for sharing what he had shared with you, but as long as you got through it without having to bring that shit up, everything is cool."

"Do you need the chapter and verse of what they did ask?"

"Nah, they just asked who was there, what did they say, what did they look like, did you notice anything, right?"

"That was pretty much it."

"Who interviewed you?"

"Two cops, one named Humbolt, the other Garvey."

"Yeah Humbolt is a dumb shit but Garvey is a prick. Did they tell you anything?"

"Not a damn thing."

"They are in out of their league with this. My bet is that it gets turned over to the county prosecutor before the week is out, but I don't think anyone is going to need to talk to you again."

Ron felt a surge of relief at those words. "OK, then I can just move on and forget about it?"

"Pretty much. You're golden with Bob for not fucking this up. I'd say that you have a job for as long as you want it."

"Does he know about my certification issues?"

There was a pause. Then Quimpy said slowly. "There are no issues, right?"
"Right."

You hear from Zoe?"

Ron felt his whole body stiffen again. Quimpy had some fucking nerve even bringing her name up. "Since when?"

There was kind of a stumbling stammer on the other end of the phone. "You know, since she left."

"She's called a couple of times."

Again there was silence. Ron wanted to say something cutting but he felt a loyalty to Quimpy and the way that Quimpy had stuck his neck out to help him get the job. He didn't believe that it should have extended to him fucking Zoe but there was really nothing more to be said about that.

"Well man, catch you through the week."

"Yeah," said Ron. "Absolutely." He had no intention of having Quimpy catch him ever again.

Chapter 52

Ron ate his Chinese food and listened to Joni Mitchell's music. He felt himself finally calming down. He stared out the window at the dark street and the blackened snow that was now just dirty ice and slush.

When the phone rang again, he moved to it with the order of spiced eggplant still in his hand.

"Hello."

"How are you?" drawled Warren Lashly.

Involuntarily Ron felt his heart quicken. Warren never called him. Something must be wrong. He wasn't sure that he could take too much more pressure today.

"I'm fine Warren, what's up?"

"You still working at teaching those little girls?"

"Yup, still working at it."

"I know this is gonna sound a little strange, but April's been wanting to see you and she asked me if I could give you a call. She's been sick. She's been very sick actually and she needs something from you."

Ron said, "OK," and paused.

"Well, she's here right now and what she asked me to do was to call you and see if you had any pot. She's been very nauseous."

"What's wrong with her?"

"I'll let her tell you that. Is there any way that you can drive some down here tonight?"

"Sure Warren, I can do that for her. Now you aren't gonna have me busted for bringing any pot to Rahway are you?"

It was a reference to the way that Warren had dissolved the partnership between Chris and him, the partnership that had begun Rahway. It was a move that forever had tagged Warren with the nickname of The Sheriff. Ron, of course, would never have turned Warren down about anything and he knew it. He would be forever grateful for what Warren had done for him with teaching, with helping him to get well after Robin, but that didn't mean that he couldn't break his balls a bit.

"There's no need for that," said Warren.

The "that" was left ambiguous and Ron decided not to pursue it. "I can be there in about an hour.

"We'll see you then," said Warren and then the phone clicked dead.

Ron glanced at the clock. It was 7:30 on a school night but he knew that he was going to do it.

Kelly answered the backdoor and smiled brightly as if Ron was one of her best friends. She bent into him and kissed his cheek. Ron felt her breasts press against her his chest and it caused him to twitch in his pants Sometimes he hated his cock. It left him with absolutely no dignity. His eyes watched Kelly's ass as she led him through the kitchen and down the one step into the sunken living room. Laureen, April and Warren were seated by the fire. Ron recognized the Brahms Requiem that was playing softly on the stereo. April smiled when he walked in and stood. Ron almost gasped at the sight of her. She had always been thin, but now she was cadaverous and she wore a red checked bandana on her head that promised that there was not much underneath it. She came to him and put her arms around his neck and kissed him. Her body felt like nothing but bones and there was a stale smell on her breath that Ron recognized from Zoe. April had been vomiting. She took his hand and led him to the group after she whispered. "Thank you so much for coming down like this."

Ron sat on a pillow, keeping his back to the fire. He opened his jacket and took it off and let it slide down in back of him as he reached into one of the pockets and took out a small bag of pot and some rolling papers. He handed them to April, who blushed without color and said, "I don't know how to do it." Warren cackled. "Well, Ron can sure help you with that if not with a lot of other things too."

Laureen giggled and said, "Warren, you'd better be nice or Kelly won't sleep with you tonight."

Kelly giggled and Warren smirked the smiles of someone very sure of himself.

Ron's eyes danced at Laureen's quip. He said, "Guess there's not much that you can hold over me, huh Laureen?"

"That's just one of her phone calls to Robin away," said Warren.

Ron smiled. "I don't think so." Then he smiled to himself. He really had not felt anything at the mention of her name.

Laureen said, "Well thank god for that. It was becoming tedious."

Everyone laughed and Ron found that he could laugh as well. He stood and pulled an album cover from the shelf, opened it and then opened the bag of pot and began to roll a joint. Looking down at the composer he said, "Richard Wagner, do you think he'll mind?"

"He's seen a lot worse," quipped Laureen.

Ron laughed again and looked into her dark eyes. "I really have missed you," he said.

Laureen stiffened as if his statement had reminded her of something uncomfortable.

"I spent the afternoon in the police station," said Ron. "One of my students was shot to death by his father."

Everyone was silent as Ron cleaned the pot and rolled the joint. Laureen said, "Well, that was a real conversation stopper." She got up and moved into the kitchen to get something to drink.

Sitting with the album cover spread open on his lap, Ron rolled joint after joint until there were 10 in a neatly stacked row and the bag was empty. The talk moved from the college to what was happening in New York's museums. Ron half-listened. Then he looked up and saw that the group was staring at him.

"What?"

"How did you learn to do that so quickly and so well?" said April.

"Lots of practice," said Ron.

"Too much for his own good," said Warren.

"Well it's a lifesaver for me tonight," said April and lit the joint. She inhaled deeply and passed it to Ron who shook his head no.

"I've got to get going," he said. "I have to be in early."

"Ron Tuck refused a joint. Will wonders never cease?" said Laureen.

Ron slid his arms back into his jacket and met Laureen's eyes. They were dark and dancing. He thought for an instant that they were actually quite beautiful. "I

was thinking the other day about whether there was ever a woman that I went to visit and called on the phone who I did not also wish to fuck. Yours was the only name that came to my mind.”

Laureen laughed. “I’m not sure whether that’s a compliment or an insult.”

Ron stood up. “I meant it in the most complimentary way.”

“Why did the kid’s father shoot him?” said Warren.

“I don’t know. I only know that I was the last one to see him alive before he was killed.”

He half turned to April. “Anytime I can help you out just give me a call.”

“Which probably means that he wants to fuck you,” laughed Laureen.

Chapter 53

“The test on Acts 1 and 2 will consist of twenty significant quotes from the play. You will receive one point for accurately identifying the speaker. One point for explaining any literary devices that are in the quote and you will earn three points for explaining its significance to the story and setting the context in which it was said.”

The groans were loud. Two of the girls flipped their books closed like they were giving up. “How are we supposed to remember every word of the play?” said Barbara. “We aren’t like you. We don’t have it all memorized.”

Ron smiled his best dimpled grin but they weren’t buying it. “Listen,” he said gently, would I ask you to do something that you couldn’t do?”

“Yes,” they responded in a responsorial that Ron thought was too spontaneous to not be heartfelt.

“OK, what impossible things have I asked you do?”

“You want us to memorize this stupid play,” said Connie.

“You make me write until my hand is cramped into a claw,” said Sonia. She accented her complaint by twisting her hand into a claw and holding it up for the class. Everyone, including Ron, laughed.

“Every time I think that I have finally figured out what you want, you announce that you are raising the bar. Sometimes I want to pick up the bar and beat you over the head with it, Mr. Tuck,” said Julie.

There was dead silence. Everyone thought that she had gone over the line. They had never seen Mr. Tuck write a discipline referral but half of them were sure that this was gonna be the first one. The story was that he had never written one and all the girls so wanted that to be the truth.

"Learning is hard," he said gently. "But you girls are better than you think that you are. Let me show you." He turned and walked to the book. He seemed to open it at random and said. Who said, "Why do you dress me in borrowed robes?"

"That's easy," said Barbara. "Mac said it to the witches when they called him the Thane of Cawdor."

Ron smiled. He was gonna get them. "And what is the literary device?"

"It's imagery," said Rose. "And that other thing."

Connie said, "Mo'teef" she said in the funny and exaggerated way that he had taught them to remember it and they all laughed.

"And what is a motif?"

"Repeating something until it gets more important," said Connie quickly.

Ron closed the book and smiled at them. "See you know more than you think that you do. This isn't gonna be hard."

"Let's do more," said Julie, whose plan was to write all of them down.

"Good," said Ron. "Everyone's notebook out."

They sped through the next 10 quotes almost flawlessly. They didn't really know it but Ron was taking them directly from the test. They knew the stuff cold.

Ron was used to the wall of noise and light that slapped him when he entered The French Maid. He made his way to the best available seat and put a \$20 on the bar.

"Welcome back, honey," said the gum cracking bartender.

He grinned. "White wine, please."

She smiled and gave her hips a little strutting wiggle when she went to get it. He had been there enough times to be clocked by the bartenders. This one wasn't married and the dancers hadn't said anything about him trying to tweak a nipple or saying anything really perverse to them when they danced for him.

When he saw Emerald, he felt his heart begin to pound. He had been half looking for her since the day that he had skipped out of The Hitching Post without another word. He was wondering if she would act annoyed with him or whether she would recognize him at all. After all, how many guys had slipped her dollar bills since Ron last saw her? How many guys had come to the next club where she was dancing? How many guys had just left her working without a good-bye or another word?

He didn't want the answers to any of these questions. He wanted the fantasy of her. He wanted to watch her bend over for him and smile at him from between her legs. He wanted to watch her crawl for him and squint and tell himself that it

was Robin crawling and that he was punishing her by making her do this until he was ready to take her back.

She was wearing an outfit that he hadn't seen before. It was thin and white and he could see the outline of her nipples and the swell of her labial lips and the whisper of the crevice between her cheeks. He sat back and gazed at her. He was pretty sure that she hadn't noticed or recognized him until she stood right in front of him on the stage and using her hands like blinders on the sides of a horse's head displayed the entirety of her breasts for him and smiled.

Ron extended his dollar, creased lengthwise and sticking out straight. She grinned and came down from the stage to get it. She opened herself again and pressed the backs of his fingers against her chest as she took it.

"Thank you for coming to see me the other day."

"I'm sorry that I couldn't stay longer," said Ron.

"It's a crappy place," she answered. "I don't think I'll be dancing there anymore."

Then still holding the dollar, she climbed back up onto the stage. She turned and spread her legs wide. She took the dollar and scratched it up the back of her left thigh and then the back of her right thigh and then sliding the end of it up and down right along the thinly clad slit of her pussy. Then she stood and turned to face him and folded it in half and slipped it down the front of her sheer G-string. She gave it a pat and moved away. For the rest of the set, Ron could see the outline of it pressed against her. It made him very hard.

When she worked the bar, he gave her another two dollars and said, "That was a very sexy thing that you did before."

He expected her to say something smart-assed or maybe nothing at all, but instead she said, "I did that just for you."

When she came out of the dressing room she came over to his chair and said, "I promised a guy over there that I would sit with him, so if you are still here, I'll see you after my next set."

Ron's face registered disappointment and she smiled. He felt a jealous rush and then told himself that he was being ridiculous. He sat back against the bar chair and watched and sipped wine and thought about Zoe. There was something about her that he missed. It was the way that she made him feel handsome.

He had always been told that he was a good-looking guy, but he had never really believed it. Where he had grown up, the standard for "good looking" had been a short thin guy with dark hair and an olive skinned complexion. Ron was none of that. He stood just under six feet tall and was broad shouldered. He had light

brown hair that turned shades of blonde in the summertime. He had a round face. Instead of full, sensual lips, his lips were thin. When he wasn't running he tended to develop a bit of a gut. He didn't have one now, but that was because he hardly ate two meals a day. He wondered if all self-concepts were formed in childhood. The girl dancing in front of him was doing pole work. He watched as she held herself upside down on the pole and opened her legs very wide. Ron stared at her pussy. He loved the sight of a woman's vagina. He loved to touch it, to kiss it, and to fuck it. The way that it closed around him when he entered it was almost indescribable. And then Emerald was standing at his shoulder again.

"I've got a few minutes before I have to go back up," she said.

"Could I see you sometime?" said Ron. "I mean not here, really see just you."

He felt her stiffen and she looked into his hazel eyes. "Do you really think that would be a good idea?"

"Yes," said Ron. "I really do. I've thought about you a lot. It would be great to be able to sit at a table with you and just talk and eat or drink or something."

"And then what would you think when you saw me here, bent over for some other guy who was waving money at me?"

"I don't know."

"I do. You'd hate it and you'd hate me for doing it even though it's my job."

"I don't think that I would."

"I know that you would. I do much better as a fantasy than I do as a girlfriend."

"I've had people say that about me too," said Ron. "That I'm not real and that I can't be a real person."

"You're real. You're too real." She slid off the stool that was next to Ron. "I've got to dance. I think that you should just see me here and be nice to me and then I can be nice to you too and nothing will get complicated."

When she walked away Ron could not help but stare at her ass and way that the bottom parts of her cheeks jiggled. "Maybe I like things complicated," he said to himself.

Chapter 54

The anticipation of the test caused the girls to be nervous and to perspire. Ron could smell it in the classroom as he walked back and forth across front of the room passing out the test. They started reading and writing instantly. Their heads were down and their mouths moved as they silently said the words to themselves and then repeated the words again. Some of the girls just began writing furiously from the moment that they got their tests. Some took a moment to read over them. One or two just stared straight ahead like they had been found guilty and were awaiting sentencing, but eventually they were all working. He liked to watch them work. It was like they were emptying their brains for him, telling him everything that they knew. They were talking to him on the tests. They were writing for him. He knew that this was the illusion that he had created and that really they were writing for themselves. Eventually they would make the transfer and be able to write for anyone. What difference did it make if they felt that they were doing it for him right now? It occurred to Ron that school was practice life. Silently he wondered if they would ever get the chance to use these skills after they left school. He announced the incrementally decreasing amounts of time left in the class. As the end grew closer, the girls began to sweat more and write faster. Ron watched them with pride and fascination. He had been a good standardized test taker in high school and in college but he did not do as well on teacher created tests. Either he had not read or studied the material or he found himself distracted by some tangential path that his brain decided to take. In college, he had been accused of doing this purposefully. He learned that even if he was not aware that he was doing it intentionally, his professors did not accept the notion that unconscious action was something for which he should not be held accountable. Invariably though, he would write a paper or make a presentation or offer a unique perspective on a piece that caused more than one teacher to excuse his test taking distractibility. When the bell rang, the girls groaned. None of them had turned in their tests. He had made it too long. They looked up at him with a simultaneously accusatory and plaintiff stare.

"I can see that it was too long," he said. "I'll work something out." They were not happy with him when they reluctantly gave up their tests and went on to the next class. He had already decided what he would do. He would give them the tests back the next day. This was a mixed bag solution. It did penalize those who crammed, but at the same time it rewarded those who had truly learned the material or those who were interested enough to go to the book that night and see

what it was that they had missed. He would not tell them of his solution. He would spring it on them. He smiled when he pictured the way that they would groan and pout.

Chapter 55

As Easter approached Ron felt very hopeful. His mother was home now and Lois was spending more and more time in Glen Ridge. George had moved back in and there seemed to be a silent, if angry truce between Marjorie and him. Ron tried his best to avoid George altogether. On the evenings that he knew George was working late, he would stop by after tutoring, or the other nights he would call. The days were getting longer and the weather was turning mild. On some days Ron could get away with just wearing his sports jacket and some evening he would get home before it was dark.

The English Department at the school consisted of four teachers. There was Sister Ruth Dolores, the department chairperson, who was a thin brown-haired nun with dark rimmed glasses and a close to the vest voice that never rose much about a whisper. There were two lay teachers, Emily Spinoza and Holly Risotto. The one was a newly married girl from the neighborhood who talked to her kids about how much she wanted to get pregnant as she did about grammar. The other, Holly, was a tall, somewhat overweight woman with reddish blonde hair and tinted glasses. She also taught drama. And then there was Ron.

The department rarely met and Ron saw little of his department colleagues who were all located in the other building. To commemorate the coming of the most sacred day of the year, Sister Donna Maria announced that the meeting would be held in the convent to celebrate the mystery of Christ Risen.

They gathered on the Tuesday before Good Friday and the day before the last day of school prior to the beginning of the holiday. By now, Ron had noticed that his vacations were longer than those of the public school teachers. He had also figured out that it was another way that the school kept the loyalty of its students and faculty. They got more vacations.

Before the meeting, Bernadette, drew Ron aside and said, "Keep an eye on Holly. We had to cover one of her classes this morning. She has been in with Donna Maria praying for most of the morning."

He gave her a look that said that he did not understand the import of what she was saying. She just put her finger to her lips, gave her head an almost imperceptible shake and used her eyes to direct his attention to Sister Cheesy.

Donna Maria was giving Holly a warm and benevolent smile. The teachers were filing in. Ron had lost his place card soon after the first meeting and had not seen the need to bring it again, but many of the teachers dutifully placed them on their laps and some of the more enterprising had found a way to attach it to their blouse collars.

"Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again," said Donna Maria as a sign that the gathering was to come to order.

The faculty came to silence. Except for Holly who threw back her head and opening her mouth wide with her glasses askew on her face, screamed, "I see Him."

Heads turned. Mouths opened. Donna Maria frowned.

Holly turned to the crucifix on the wall and looked up with a radiance of torment on her face. "He's coming into me. He wants me."

Sister Donna Maria moved to her and placed both of her hands on the crown of Holly's head in an effort to soothe her. "He wants all of us," she said rapturously and lifted her eyes upward and then closed them and began to whisper prayer.

"It hurts!" screamed Holly. "He's coming into me."

Bernadette rolled her eyes but her face showed concern and anger. Doris got up and moved next to Holly. This last statement caused Donna Maria to back up a step or two as if she had been repulsed by the unbridled electricity of what she heard.

The next scream was a wordless cry of anguish. It was feral and shrill. Ron was stunned. He waited for someone to escort Holly from the room or to call an ambulance but no one moved. The scream echoed in the room and when Ron looked at the faces of his colleagues he saw that they were swiveling between Holly and the crucifix.

Incredibly, Donna Maria tried to continue the meeting. "As we prepare students for these coming days, remember that our first consideration is..."

"He's naked and he wants me," yowled Holly. She began to pull at the collar of her white button down shirt and the top two buttons popped off and bounced across the top of the table that was in front of her.

Now two of the nuns jumped to their feet and Donna Maria said, "Sisters, please help Miss Risotto."

When they took her by the elbows and tried to help her to stand, she looked at them wild-eyed. "He doesn't want you. He wants me." she said in tortured accusation. She stood and faced the faculty. "Can't you see how he wants me?" She rolled her hips in grotesque invitation at the crucifix.

Ron looked around for Rita Julia, but the Mother Superior was not in the room. And then to his shock, Bernadette stood quietly and left. She must be calling the police or the hospital, thought Ron.

But now Holly was walking towards him, flanked by the two nuns, Ruth Dolores and Alma Mercedes.

Holly stopped in front of Ron. "Can you help me?"

"I don't know how," said Ron trying to meet her eyes. He sensed the sincerity of her pain and looked at her with a mixture of compassion, fear and revulsion.

"Please," she said, lowering her head and crying. "Please take me out of here."

Ron felt a rush a cold desperation wash through him like ice water. "Holly," he said gently. "We need to get you some help."

She cried harder. Her shoulders were shaking like a trembling dead leaf that clung to spring branch that was trying to get rid of its excess baggage to make room for new growth.

Abruptly, Doris stood up. "I'll go with you," she said to Ron.

Ron felt himself go pale. They couldn't be serious. This woman needed a hospital and a strait jacket and they wanted him to take her home.

"Please," blubbered Holly and she began to get down onto her knees. The nuns held her up. Ron looked for Donna Maria, but she had shrunk into the corner of the room and was not looking at them.

Then Donna Maria rose out of her corner and walked towards them. "Mr. Tuck, you may be excused from the rest of the meeting so that you can take Miss Risotto home. She needs to rest." Then she turned to Holly. "Please take tomorrow off, Miss Risotto. I will see that your classes are covered and then you will have the entire vacation to get your strength back."

Holly's shoulders trembled and she did not look up to meet Sister Donna Maria's gaze. Muffled moans worked their way out of her mouth and nostrils along with mucus and drool. Her eyeliner had run in dark streaks down her cheeks and give her the appearance of a crying clown. Doris held her hand and Ron could see that Holly was squeezing it so tightly that her fingers were white. Tears that were blackened from the makeup under her leaking eyes dripped down onto her white shirt and left wet, black trails.

Doris spoke to Sister Donna Maria. "I'll help him with her and make sure that she is alright."

The three of them made a slow, carefully watched procession from the convent's meeting room and towards the front door. Holly looked up at a statue of

the Blessed Virgin and wailed again. The sound pierced the silence of the convent like a muffled blade.

When they got to the car, Doris helped Holly into the front seat. Ron went and around to the driver's side and flicked the lever that allowed the seat to move forward so that Doris could access the rear seat, but Doris didn't get in. She looked at Ron with a defensive glare.

"My husband will be expecting me. I'm having a crowd for dinner on Good Friday."

"You've got to be kidding. You said that you would help."

"This is as far as I go," said Doris and without waiting for a reply turned her back to the car and quickly waddled away.

"You've been a big help," said Ron.

He clicked the seat forward and slid in. Holly was holding her head and staring out the side window.

"Where do you live, Holly?"

"Bellville."

Ron started the car. "Where in Belleville?"

"On Little Street. Upstairs from a family." She began to cry again.

Ron put the car into gear and began to drive. He knew approximately where Little Street was and so he headed up towards the park thinking that he could save lights and time by winding along a road the rimmed the outskirts of the park.

After a few blocks, Holly said, "I have dreams about you." Ron didn't answer. "In the dreams I'm wearing a uniform and you are scolding me." Ron began to perspire in the cold car. "You tell me that I am a bad girl but it feels good when you say it. Do you know why?"

Ron said, "Holly, do you have a doctor?"

"No."

"Maybe I should take you to the hospital."

Immediately, she turned to him and said, "No. no please. No hospital. I'll do anything that you want me to do. I'll be anything that you want me to be, but please no hospital." Her voice was rising in desperation and Ron could see that the only way that he would get her into the hospital would be with the help of the police. He did not want to do that. "The girls are all in love with you," she said as if she was revealing a dark secret. "We talk about you all the time." This idea was incomprehensible to Ron, but somehow the thought of their minds being entrusted to Holly made him angry. What kind of a role model was she for the nuns to put in front of his students? How could Irene Emanuel have hired this woman?

They came out of the park on Heller Parkway and Ron headed towards Silver Lake. Holly screamed like a siren. "No railroad tracks! No railroad tracks! No, no, I can't ride over the crosses on the railroad tracks!"

Ron pulled the car to the side of the road. If he just drove ahead and crossed the tracks he could get her to Claara Maas Hospital within a couple of minutes, but then he felt guilty. He would just be dumping her like unwanted furniture on the street. He couldn't do that. It would make him no better than Doris.

"OK," he said. "No railroad tracks." His brain began to run through the possible permutations. There were railroad tracks that separated Bellville from Newark with every route that his mind saw. He clicked in one route after another and then he saw it. Where Broadway became Washington Street there was an overpass. He could drive under the railroad tracks. He turned the car around.

he was silent as the streets passed and then in a very small, little girl voice she asked, "Where are you taking me?"

"I know a place where there is an underpass," he said.

In the same small voice, she asked coyly, "Do you wear underpants?" Ron didn't answer. "Sometimes, I don't," she said like she was confessing.

The image was not one that Ron chose to picture, but it set off a chain reaction in his brain that asked the question, "Would I be this anxious to drop her off if I thought she was pretty?" The fact that he even asked himself the question filled Ron with self-disgust.

"I could be your geisha and you could tell me to do anything and I would do it for you," she said.

"Holly, you really need to see a doctor."

Her voice shifted and became deep and almost menacing. "Why? Is it because I am a woman who is strong enough to say what it is that she really wants? Is that why you are pushing me away?"

"No," said Ron quickly. He didn't want to set her off again and they were coming up to the trestle now and he felt that if he just got under the railroad tracks that somehow things would be better.

"The girls told me that you don't have a girlfriend when I asked them about you."

Ron wanted to strangle his students. He wondered if they had fueled her fantasies. If they had used her vulnerability to get out of doing work or because they thought that she was amusing. For a moment he was very angry with them. He vowed to not tell them anything else about his life.

Now they were on Washington Avenue and heading north. It was then that she seemed to gather herself and began to calmly provide him with directions. Ron was hopeful. Maybe this episode was passing and he could just drop her off. When they pulled up in front of her house, she said "Would you like to come in for some tea or a drink?"

"I don't think so," said Ron.

She began to cry quietly. "You think I'm disgusting and pathetic, don't you?"

"No, I don't," said Ron. "I think that maybe you have been working too hard and need to get some rest and maybe see a doctor."

"I don't need a doctor. I need a man who isn't afraid." Then she opened the car door and said, "Thank you for getting me home, Mr. Tuck."

Ron watched as she walked up to the house, took her keys out of her purse, opened the door and disappeared inside. As he pulled away he felt a twinge of concern but it was overcome by a huge wave of relief. Why did all the crazy women want him?

End of part 2

Chapter 56

The sun was strong and the air was humid. The sky was a high pale blue. At ten o'clock in the morning the temperature was already at 90 degrees. Ron's breath was an easy flow as he ran around the cinder path track. He was starting his third mile and his feet were lightly slapping down on the track. His legs felt strong and his arms were swinging in an easy and free motion. As he circled the backstop of the baseball part of the quarter mile oval, two kids who had started playing just after he arrived waved to him. Ron felt that easy smile on his face as he leaned into the curve and started down the sundrenched, longer straightaway of the oval. He could hear birds and he could smell the cut grass. The oval was moving quickly in front of his eyes. His breathing was his speedometer; it told him when he needed to slow his pace or when he could let himself loose.

His longest run had been seven miles, but he wasn't after that today. He had read that the maximum cardio vascular benefit was reached after a three mile run and made the decision that only once or maybe twice a week he would push himself to run until his legs began to feel wobbly. It pleased him that it was never his breathing that caused him to stop. All those years of smoking cigarettes and pot

and now his body was turned on like a smooth running machine with fragile tire rods. It was true that most of the people that ran his kind of daily distance did not use a track, but his knees liked the soft, even surface and the round and round repetition of the oval took him along the bleachers that separated the field from the back yard of his mother's house. It felt like home.

Now he was at two and half miles and it pleased him that he wasn't thinking. He felt both totally in and out of his body at the same time. His shadow extended out in front of him and Ron stared at it as he ran. With a lap and a half to go, he picked up the pace and waited to see how much of a kick he had left. His breathing quickened and his arms pumped harder. He churned his legs. The only question now was when he was going to begin his sprint. With a half a lap left, he kicked it up another notch. Not quite all out yet and he could feel the more rapid intake of his breaths, but his mind was on his legs. He would shut it down if there was any wobble to his strides but he was hoping to be able to push. With 120 yards to go, he let it rip and felt himself flying down the track. He could not feel his feet striking the ground. He pumped and urged himself with the internal chant of "faster."

When he crossed the finish line, he saw a burly man sitting in the stands watching him. The man smiled and waved. Ron jogged and walked in a two hundred yard loop that brought him back to the stands where the man was sitting.

"If you had been in that kind of shape when you played for me, you would have been an all-state guard," said Max Kresge.

"I was too stupid to know that I had to be in shape to play football then," said Ron, grinning with the sublime euphoria of the endorphin rush.

"Yup, it showed."

Ron laughed and peeled the heavy, wet sweat-stained t-shirt over his head and off of his body. Despite the heat, it had made him feel chilled but now the sun was warming him and he extended one leg up straight onto the lowest bench on the bleachers and began to stretch his hamstrings.

"How are the knees?"

"They feel good, coach, maybe the best they have ever felt. How are you doing?"

"Not bad for an old man that got kicked to the curb," said Kresge in that gravelly voice. He was a thick man with a gut and a barrel chest. He must be pushing seventy now and was still a formidable presence.

Ron switched legs. "Did I ever tell you that I became a teacher?"

Kresge chortled. "That just convinces me that football players really are dumb shits." Kresge did not ask what he was teaching. "You ever see any of the guys that you played with?"

"Not since I graduated," said Ron. "I'm not big on the reunion thing and besides they weren't the happiest days of my life."

"I remember that."

As a kid coming from Newark, Ron had not exactly fit into the Glen Ridge social set. The one place where he had always been able to make friends had been the football field, but the team had already been successful before he got there. They had lost a single game the year that he transferred, when he was still considered ineligible because he had come from a parochial school, and the loss had stuck in the town's craw. They were supposed to win every game. When Ron got to play as senior, they did go undefeated, but he was a peripheral player who could hit like a truck but had bad knees and no speed.

"This town never knew I was a Jew until they decided that it was time for me to go, then I became the money grubbing kike who didn't know when it was time to quit."

"I didn't know that coach. Do you still come to the games?"

"Screw that," said Kresge. "I go down to Florida right after the first frost. Plenty of good football down there."

Ron sat down on the bleachers and pulled on a dry t-shirt. He loved that a medium hung loose over his stomach. "I'm in charge of discipline too," he exaggerated.

"Ronnie, you got to learn. That's the worst fucking job in the school. Don't let them make you believe that it's an honor."

Ron nodded and wondered how this man who had been a wall of strength had cracked into such bitter pieces. "I love the kids and the classroom." He did not mention that it was all girls.

Max Kresge looked at him from behind his sunglasses and baseball cap. He had tried to tell the kid but the dumb son-of-a-bitch had never been fast on the uptake.

Ron stashed his wet t-shirt on the front seat of his car and climbed the steps to his mother's house. He went around back and entered through the unlocked door. Lois and his mother were sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee.

"Ronald, look how you're sweating!" said Marjorie.

"I was just running, Mom."

"In this heat? You'll have a stroke."

"It feels good."

"There's some Crystal Lite in the refrigerator. Pour a glass and sit down and cool off. My god, you're dripping on the floor."

Ron poured a glass of the stuff and carried the pitcher to the table.

"How are you feeling?" he said.

"It takes me a while to get moving in the morning but then I'm good," she said. She lit a Virginia Slim. Lois lit a Virginia Slim.

"You look really healthy," said Lois. "I make your mother have a nice slow cup of coffee before we go anywhere on days like today."

"I'm glad that you came, Ronald. There's something that I want to talk with you about. I want you to come to the ceramics shop on Thursday night."

"I have a tutoring appointment."

"At night?"

"I have to go when the parents are at home." This was technically the truth although Ron didn't really have an appointment on Thursday.

"There's a nice girl that I want you to meet. Her name is Denise Delatorre."

"Mom."

"She's a very pretty girl with a cute shape and a lovely mother."

"That's the first thing that I look for in a girl, Mom. Always have." Ron nodded in mockery. "Within the first few minutes, I always ask about her mother."

Lois laughed in spite of the situation but then withered as Marjorie glared at her. "If you aren't going to help, the least that you can do is not encourage his shitiness."

Marjorie decided on another tact. "Robin dumped you and the mouse moved away. What are you going to do? You gonna sit around that tenement of an apartment and play music and feel sorry for yourself?"

Ron bit. "That's not what I do, Mom. You know that's not what I do. You know how many hours I work."

Marjorie knew that she had him now. "And who helped you to get that job?"

Ron shoulders sagged. "You did."

"And you fought me about that but when you trusted me it all worked out, didn't it?"

He nodded.

"It was me that sent your resume to that school, wasn't it? You were stuck working in the jail where they slashed your tires and beat you up."

"No one beat me up."

"You came home filed with bruises, didn't you?"

"Do we really have to do this? You want me to come and meet the girl, right? Even though I haven't dated an Italian girl since I was fifteen years old. Even though there is nothing about a girl who goes to a ceramics shop with her mother that could possibly be of even the slightest bit of interest to me."

"The mouse was artistic."

"She's a painter and a sculptor. Doing ceramics isn't quite the same thing, Mom."

Lois raised her eyebrows and thought about interjecting that she loved to paint and loved to do ceramics. She decided that she would rather say that to Marjorie after Ron left. She could make it sound like she was on Marjorie's side.

"Oh, I forgot. You're too good for anybody who would come to a ceramics shop, anybody that your mother might possibly like."

There was just no way out without just refusing. Ron felt locked neatly into a corner. He tried his ace in the hole. "Have you heard from my father?"

"Yes, he called. I guess that now that you don't need his help anymore that he is also not good enough for you to visit." She paused strategically. "I see things differently since the heart attack, Ronald. I don't know how much more time have left and I would like to see you settled before anything else happens to me. Who is going to care enough about what happens to you after I'm not here anymore?"

Ron closed his eyes. She had him. There was no way out. Now if he refused, it would be a much bigger problem than he was ready for. "What time on Thursday?"

Marjorie lit another Virginia Slim. "Don't do me any favors, Ronald."

Ron shrugged. "OK."

"Find another girl who breaks your heart or throws up on you."

Ron winced. He should have known better than to have shared that with her, but she was so vulnerable and he had let his guard down. "Do you want me to come to meet her?"

"The class is from seven o'clock until eight-thirty. Do what you want."

"I'll be there."

"She's a nice girl with a good job in a bank. Who knows if she would even look twice at you, even though she would be a jerk not to."

Ron stood up. "I said that I would come."

Marjorie eyed him again. "Have you stopped eating again?"

"No, Mom. I eat."

Lois said. "A man with a flat stomach like that always looks good, Margie." Now Lois looked at him trying to make peace. "You're as flat as a washboard."

Ron smiled.

Chapter 57

The ceramics shop was right on Bloomfield Avenue just one block out of Newark. Ron knew that this small distance was important to his mother. Somehow, she would have seen it as a failure if she had returned to work in Newark for any reason, but that shop had a Bloomfield address and that made all the difference to her. Lois, who had also been a lifelong resident of Newark and a neighborhood fixture didn't care or see it that way, but she was glad to accommodate her partner. It was a storefront that was located between a meat market and a liquor store and that made parking difficult, but Marjorie had worked out a deal with a bank a short block down the street and in exchange for giving free classes to any of their employees, her clients were allowed to park in the bank once they had secured cards that read The Ceramic Kitchen and placed them on the driver's side of their front windshield. Marjorie carefully monitored the distribution of cards and chastised Lois every time one of her family members or friends used a card to park with convenience. Lois took the verbal punishment, but surreptitiously continued to distribute the cards while cautioning their recipients to not "say anything."

Ron did not have a card and so he circled the block several times before he was lucky enough to catch someone pulling out and parked on the street. The shop itself consisted of a large, open workspace with long banquet style tables and folding chairs. There were heavy wooden shelves along two walls of the room and it was here that the customers marked and stored their unfinished pieces. At the front of the store was another large, lighted case that contained finished pieces that Marjorie and Lois had completed and which were for sale. They were also the demonstration models, showing what could be accomplished when someone was proficient in the craft. Christmas trees with embedded lights, lamps, large dolls and platters along with various other kind of dust-catching bric-a-brac decorated every square inch of the front shelves. Wedding favors were becoming a new favorite and Marjorie had large books that she could use to encourage people to take advantage of what she referred to as the personal touch. The smaller back room held two kilns and a supply of newly casted pieces. Marjorie and Lois had not yet purchased the molds that they would need to really turn a profit. It was also here that a large collection of paints and brushes and water dishes were stored. A small bathroom was off the side of the back room and Marjorie had taken pains to make sure that it was neat, decorated and cleaned every day. She did not do the cleaning herself anymore, but Lois was glad to oblige.

There were a dozen women seated around the tables when Ron came through the front door. Marjorie was smoking a Virginia Slim with a half painted clown in front of her.

"Ronald," she called out. "What a nice surprise."

Ron smiled and moved to his Mom and kissed her on the cheek. "Hi Mom." He knew from her greeting that he was supposed to play along about him coming there casually.

"Everyone," announced Marjorie, "this is my son Ronald." Marjorie beamed as Ron flashed his best dimpled grin at the women. Marjorie began her introductions. "This is Mrs. Porcelli, and Mrs. Triano and Mrs. Rolandelli and Mrs. Scafetti and Mrs. DelaTorre and her daughter Denise." Marjorie went on and on until she had introduced Ron to everyone in the shop. Ron tried to keep the smile on his face but it got plastered there and then begin to hurt and cause his face to ache until he was sure that his smile had turned into a grimace. He tried giving each of the women a new smile commensurate with her name and that seemed to help. He noticed Mrs. Delatorre nudge Denise and the girl stood up and went to into the back room to use the bathroom.

Ron's gaze took her in quickly. She was about 5'6" and had a set of gorgeous breasts and a firm and round rear that moved with an easy sway as she walked in front of him and then disappeared into the back room. She was wearing snug brown slacks and tan flowered blouse that was color matched to her pants. Her hair was a deep lustrous brown and bounced on her shoulders as she moved.

"Ronald drives down to the shore and picks up new pieces for us every weekend." The ladies smiled and nodded.

Mrs. Delatorre nodded and said, "What do you do for a living, Ronald?"

"He's a teacher," said Marjorie. Ron felt himself start to bristle but took a long slow breath, inhaling from his nostrils and then exhaling from his mouth in an easy way that he hoped was not noticeable.

"In the summer time, I mostly tutor," he said.

"It must be very nice to have the summers off," said Mrs. Rolandelli. "I think that you know my son, Butchie."

"Sure," said Ron. "I remember Butchie Rolandelli from the old neighborhood. How's he doing?"

"He's a fireman. He's married and has two children."

"Wow," said Ron. "That's great. Give him my best."

"Look at the time already," said Marjorie. "The hour and a half just flies, doesn't it?"

"It always does when you are among friends and are out of the house," said Mrs. Triano.

Everyone laughed softly and then they began to clean off their tables and put their pieces back on the shelves.

Denise came out of the back room and moved towards Ron and his mother. She flashed her sparkingly white teeth in a warm smile. "It's nice to meet you, Ron." She extended her hand and Ron took it. It was slightly damp from the bathroom sink and she squeezed his hand lightly as they completed their introduction. Ron looked into her face and it was warm and welcoming with a sparkle in her eyes that told him that she was also playing along.

"So what are you working on?" said Ron.

"Oh, let me show you," she said.

She moved to her place at the table making sure that Ron got a good look at her from behind. Ron followed and found himself attracted to the way that she moved and seemed so easy with him.

"It's a group of bluebirds in a tree," she said as she picked it up from under the base and held it up for him.

"It looks like a lot of work," said Ron, not sure what else to say about the tree and the birds that perched on its branches.

She shrugged and grinned. "It's for my grandmother. She loves birds."

"Maybe you should buy her a parakeet," said Ron.

Denise giggled and said, "I don't think she would like a real bird. They make noise and my grandfather likes the house quiet."

Ron wondered how much longer he was gonna have to stay before he could flee this place. He nodded.

"You know how the old people are," she said. She leaned into him and said softly. "Thank you for not saying how ugly it is."

Ron was slightly startled by this. "It's just different from me."

"Me too," confided Denise, "but my Nana would do anything for me and it's the least that I can do for her."

Ron liked this and smiled for her. "I can understand that. I was the same way with my Aunt Dottie.

"There's the real smile," she said. "So much better than the other one."

Ron felt himself blush. This girl wasn't dumb. "I guess you're going home with your Mom now," he said.

"Yes, I get up very early during the week, but tomorrow is Friday, thank God."

"When are you driving down the shore, Ronald?" called Marjorie from the other side of the room. "Mrs. Porcelli wants to order a piece and I'm hoping we can have it for her by Monday."

"I'll go down on Saturday afternoon after I get done with my appointments," said Ron.

Then on an impulse he turned to Denise. "Want to take a ride down with me on Saturday?"

"Well it is Thursday night and I think that I'm supposed to say that I'm busy, but I'm really not doing anything and I would love to go."

She gave Ron her phone number and Ron told her that he would call when he was done on Saturday and she could tell him where she lived.

"That will be exciting," she said. "I love the ocean."

That night Ron called Chris Calvin. Although months went by during the school year when they did not speak to each other, during the summer it was different. Chris had just passed the New Jersey Bar exam and was now a full-fledged lawyer. Although he was still living on East 6th Street, the reasons for his residence in Manhattan were dwindling. He had graduated from NYU. He had graduated from New York Law. Much of the tuition for both institutions had come from the dealing of pot, which he had not done in over a year now. He still liked to see Ron but it was time for Chris to begin his serious life and that meant making connections. Ron really wasn't going to be of any help in that regard and Chris knew that the two of them would no doubt drift further and further apart until they saw each other once or twice a year, if that. Chris thought Ron was bright but he was still hopelessly idealistic and did not want to do what it would take to be able to enjoy the finer things in life. That was what Chris wanted. The first step in the plan was someone with whom he could start a family, a woman that he could see himself with for a long time. He wanted a woman who was interested in having children and he was pretty sure that he had found her.

Hope Stafford was a pretty woman. She was divorced and had a little girl but she was young and strong and healthy. What's more she came from a socially secure family and had been a debutante. Chris liked this very much. She had good genes. She knew how to conduct herself and she could show Chris things that he needed to know and tell him things that he needed to do. It never occurred to Chris that the money would not follow but what he knew he needed was a good foundation upon which he could build.

"Hey Chris, its Ron. How ya doin?"

"Good," said Chris. "What are you up to?"

"I was thinking of driving in, maybe play a little music and hang for a while."

"That would be cool," said Chris. "I was thinking that I could use a day off tomorrow."

Ron laughed. "Alright. How is the supply situation?"

"Low but easily rectified." said Chris.

When Ron got there, Chris called "dial-a-dime." He had been turned on to it while he was at New York Law. A quick call with an address that was on the customer list and within a half hour, someone appeared on the street in front of your apartment with a quarter ounce. The cost was \$20 and the quality was good. They sat cross-legged on the floor of his tiny apartment while Ron cleaned and rolled and Chris selected some music. He always had music that Ron hadn't heard and Ron usually found it good although he tended to want to return to his favorites after he listened to the new stuff. More and more Chris was finding that it was the only time that he listened to this music and it occurred to him more than once that Ron seemed trapped in it and willing to listen to it over and over. Ron was different since Robin. He seemed more interested in reliving old experiences than he was in having new ones. Chris hoped that it was a phase from which he would emerge before it became too boring to continue to tolerate. Ron had even started writing a book about their days at college. Nostalgia was not all that attractive. Mose Allison was cooing the song "Everybody's Crying Mercy" as they smoked the first of the three joints that Ron had rolled.

"I met a girl," said Chris.

"Alright!" said Ron triumphantly. "What's her name?"

"Hope."

"And is there?"

Chris grinned. "I think there might be."

"What does she look like?"

"Well, why don't you hang till tomorrow morning and you can see for yourself and maybe give us a ride back over to Jersey."

"I can do that," said Ron. "So, what does she look like?"

"Strawberry blonde hair, sweet face I'd say about 5'5" and well-constructed."

Ron was nodding and smiling and sucking on the joint. He passed it to Chris. The smoke was filling his brain and giving the apartment a comfortable easy feel. The warm, humid air now seemed to have the whisper of a breeze. The pillows felt soft. Ron felt himself climbing up the music on spirals of smoke. His head was starting the feel good. His body was relaxing. He sucked in very hard when the joint came

back to him and then he began to cough and choke. The lack of air made his head buzz and he closed his eyes and rode the spasmodic coughs until he could breathe again and when he reopened his eyes, he was in an even better place. "Damn, dial-a-dime. That was good!"

Chris giggled. "Iron lung still going strong," he said. He sat back still somewhat amazed that Ron immediately lit the second joint. "You are amazing."

"What?" laughed Ron. "We're almost there but it's like the big leagues. It's hard to get there but you have to work even harder to stay at that level."

Chris lay back against the pillows and smoked the second joint with Ron. They passed it between them over a large Italian pasta bowl that Chris used to collect his seeds and stems. He was always able to eke out another joint if he needed it, unless Ron stayed around too long.

"You heard from The Sheriff?" said Chris.

"Not in a while, but I heard from April that he asked Laureen to move out."

"Of course," laughed Chris in his imitation Southern drawl. "There was only so much that he could do for her."

They both laughed. The idea of Warren "doing it for ya" was shorthand for him wanting you around only as long as he found the situation amusing and then finding some excuse as to why it would be in everybody's best interest if that person left Rahway, which Warren would explain was not really that person's home but his home. And now it was time for that person to move onto something new. After the second joint, Ron immediately lit the third. Chris reached for his guitar and told Ron to go ahead. He lay back and sucked it like a sweet nipple while Chris played his version of "Long Black Veil." His voice was low and the rhythm of his guitar was right on the melody. When he forgot some of the words as he inevitably did, he would pause before starting again. It always amazed Ron that he could start and stop the melody that way and always seem to go right back into the feeling of the song. They did best when Ron sang and Chris played. It allowed Chris to just concentrate on the guitar and there weren't a lot of songs to which Ron did not know all the words. His singing was awful but at least it kept him involved.

Ron thought that Hope Stafford was perfect for Chris. They seemed like two pieces of a soon to be joined puzzle. His thick, dark hair and her light flowing crop with wisps that occasionally dangled down in front of her eyes and caused her to raise her fingers and push them away as if there was something that she did not want to miss passing in front of her gaze. They both giggled contagiously. She seemed to strike these natural poses for him, and he seemed to delight in watching her. They spoke to each other tenderly and she would run her fingers along his

shoulders for no apparent reason except for the joy of touching him, and he would sit very still for it like a cat that wanted to purr.

She smiled for Ron and kissed him on the cheek and pressed her breasts into his chest when she did it. Ron did not find himself aroused by it, but he was pleased at what the promise of her meant for his friend. In the few seconds that they had alone, he smiled at Chris and said, "She's got my vote."

Chris smiled at Ron as if what he had said mattered and nodded enthusiastically. By now Ron had figured out that when Chris had a woman that his tendency was to disappear with her into a cocoon that did not extend to his friends. So Ron knew that he wouldn't be seeing a lot of Chris, but it really didn't matter that much. The school year would be starting in just a couple of weeks.

Chapter 58

Ron finished tutoring a little before 2 pm on Saturday. He drove down to his mother's car and traded his two door for Lois's hatch back Nissan. The hatch and the collapsible back seat gave him enough room for the plaster casted pieces that he would load into the back and the excellent springs on the new car made the ride smooth enough so that he didn't have to worry about breakage.

Denise gave him very precise directions to her family's house in the Forest Hills section. It was one of the only remaining upscale sections left in Newark and Ron pulled into a driveway that was short and elevated up to a modern looking home with a statue of the Blessed Virgin outside in front of the house. The statue was clad in blue and Ron felt queasy when he looked at it. He wondered if his teaching at the Catholic school had perhaps given Denise and her mother the wrong idea.

Denise was wearing a matching shorts and top set that was blue and covered in daisies. Her white strapped sandals also had daisies on the crossing strap. When she got into the car, Ron said with a grin. "You're looking fresh."

She held out up her right foot and fingered the plastic flower. "As a daisy, right?"

"That's what I was thinking," said Ron.

"Well, a girl's got to be coordinated."

"Why?"

"Because, Ronald," she said with a teasing grin, "when I look good on the outside it helps me to feel good on the inside."

"I never thought about it."

"You're a guy. Most guys don't think about it that way."

"I used to," said Ron. "When I was a kid and worked for Ripley Clothes, I did the whole bit. I wore the high rolls and I had a leather and a suede from Cooper Leather. I sent everything that I wore to the cleaners."

"What happened?" she asked with sincerity and a serious gaze.

"Well, we moved for one thing."

She put her arm lightly on his shoulder and said, "You can take the boy out of Newark but you can never really take the Newark out of the boy. That's what I think anyway."

There was something about the boy girl thing that she kept doing that Ron was finding disconcerting. It was like she had this manual in her head about the way that things were supposed to be. "Do you really believe all that?"

"I don't know if I believe all of it. I know that if I was walking down the street with a guy like you that I would feel safe. I don't think that part of you is changeable."

Ron thought about that. Robin had always said that she felt very safe with him. Zoe had said that he wanted to protect her. Maybe she had something.

"I think college changed me," said Ron.

"Was it a good change?"

"Yeah," said Ron. "I think I would have gone crazy without it. Not that I'm not fairly fucked up now, but I mean really crazy."

"Do you always use that language?" she said quickly.

"What language?"

"You know. That word."

Ron laughed. "We used it all the time in Newark."

"But not on a first date," said Denise.

They were on the Parkway heading south and Ron wished that he could turn to look into her eyes but he was going too fast for that. "One of the things that I learned in college was that there is no such thing as a bad word, Denise."

"My Dad says that college people think too much."

All at once Ron felt like he was with a being from another planet. It was Planet Pasta where everyone had statues of saints and never shit where they ate. It was the world of frozen behaviors where people acted out the same melodramas over and over. He felt superior. But then again, didn't she want him to feel superior? Wasn't that one of the rules on Planet Pasta?

Ron turned on the radio. "What kind of music do you like?" he asked.

"I like all kinds but mostly I like the oldies," said Denise.

Of course you do, thought Ron.

Then Denise added, "But Sinatra is still the best."

This last comment threw Ron into confusion. In his heart he loved Sinatra, but he kept this passion well hidden from his friends. They would never understand and the one time he had talked with Chris about it, he had made a dismissive face and said "Strings make me sick."

"I was raised on Sinatra," said Ron.

"Me too," said Denise.

Then Ron said very quietly, "His politics suck."

"I don't know what his politics are," she said. "But what have they got to do with his music?"

"I like music that is sung by the people who wrote it. It makes me think that it is really what they feel and think."

"How do you know that it isn't what he feels and thinks?"

"It could be," said Ron. He felt some inner confusion and turmoil that he didn't want to feel. It dismissed it all saying, "It's my mother's music. It's World War 2 music. It's over. It's music for a different time."

"Whose music do you like to listen to?"

"Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Jackson Browne, Leonard Cohen." Ron recited from his internal pantheon.

"I've heard of Bob Dylan but I don't know the rest of those people."

"Joni and Jackson are kind of the California sound."

"Like the Beach Boys?" said Denise. "I like their music."

"Not quite like the Beach Boys," said Ron patiently. Internally he was feeling guilty about rolling his eyes when he said it. He couldn't help but remember the hours that he spent playing Help Me Ronda and I Get Around and he even liked the Sloop John B. but that wasn't serious music, not the way that his music was serious.

"Ron, do you think that you're a snob?"

Ron laughed and said, "I think that I probably am and I worked hard to get this way."

"Why did you do that?"

Ron thought for a moment. Somewhere deep inside of himself a voice said that it was because he wanted to be accepted, but he dismissed that response with a cynical voice that said he should never disclose anything like that on a first date. Quietly he said, "Because I didn't want to be second rate and backward anymore." He saw her wince and felt her recoil as surely as if he had slapped her in the face. He felt the need to continue. "When I got to college, I realized just how ignorant and ill prepared I was and made a promise to myself that I could be better."

She touched his shoulder again and said, "I admire your drive."

Street Fighting Man came on the radio and Ron prayed that she would not ask him if he thought that Mick Jaggar really believed in his heart the things that he was singing about.

The ceramics warehouse was a large, dusty hanger that looked like it used to house much larger equipment. The unpainted, unfired pieces were stored on long low shelves that stretched along all of the walks and made aisles in the center of the structure. Ron had a shopping list and a flat bed, two tiered trolley on which he would carefully place each piece after inspecting it for cracks or chips. It was definitely a buyer beware situation and Ron had learned to inspect each piece with a careful eye. Denise walked in back of him and he could feel her eyes on him as he lifted the pieces up and ran his finger gently across the surfaces and the bases of the soon to be ceramic projects. He felt responsible for this phase of the business and both Lois and his mother would praise his eye and the care that he used to make sure that they only got those things that they could sell.

When they passed by the eagles and the owls, Ron grinned teasingly and said, "I can see these in your future."

Denise started to say that she liked the owls but then she stopped herself when she saw the slight smirk and twinkle in his eyes. She would have to learn when he was teasing her or else she would never feel like she had firm footing. Maybe she should let him enjoy teasing her. Maybe he would like that. It was kind of exciting that she wasn't sure what he was thinking, but it also made her nervous. She supposed guys needed to be a little bit arrogant. It was who they were. But it was better when their egos were more transparent, like when he stared at her body with that lust filled look, but he hadn't looked at her that way once since they had come into the warehouse.

Denise moved in front of him and bent over at the waist for a piece on one of the lowest shelves. She smiled to herself when she felt his eyes on her. There it was. He was still interested. She lifted a pumpkin up and said, "Do you like Halloween?"

"Not so much," said Ron.

After they checked out and he loaded the pieces into the hatchback, he said, "Would you like to walk by the ocean?"

She took his hand and said, "I would love that."

She watched as he took off his shoes and socks. She frowned when she saw the bear claws that he had for toenails but didn't say anything about them. She slipped off her sandals and they walked along the sand. Ron had his shoes in one

hand with the socks stuffed inside of them, and she held her sandals and felt his hand slide around her waist and rest low on her hip. His hand was a little bit too low on her hip and she tried to raise it up to her waist, but compromised by moving closer so that her hip pressed against his as they walked.

Ron could not help but think of Robin and the way that the two of them had always fallen into a perfect rhythm when they walked. He grew quiet and stared at the water.

Denise said, "I know that I'm changing my ideas about things, but the changes don't happen overnight and, with work and all, it's real easy to get into a pattern."

"Do you think that your patterns are good for you?"

"I never thought about it. They just are there and I go along with them."

"You can't change if you go along," said Ron. Then he stopped in the middle of the beach and kissed her.

She had wanted him to kiss her. She felt her heart speed up at the feel of his lips on hers but then he was opening his mouth and his hand was sliding lower on her hip and squeezing her behind. She stiffened and broke the kiss off and stepped back. "Ron, I just met you." She saw the disappointment on his face. He looked like her father did when her mother said that they were having chicken for dinner. "I liked kissing you," she said in a conciliatory tone.

"Let's go back to the car," said Ron.

She wanted him to say something else. She wanted him to ask her one of his hard questions that would make her think and she could feel like she was learning, but he wasn't saying anything. The kiss was hanging over them like a dark cloud that wasn't doing anything but blocking the sun. "Don't be mad at me," she said.

When he started the car, Ron said, "When I was seventeen I went out with this girl named Patty. I really liked Patty. I thought she was one of the prettiest girls I had ever seen"

Denise was happy that he was talking but why was he talking about an old girlfriend? That wasn't exactly the conversation that she was hoping to have.

"Anyway, you remind me of Patty. She had rules too."

"Everyone has rules, Ron."

"That's true," said Ron. His jaw tightened and she saw those high cheekbones, and the way that they gave a hollow to his cheeks and seemed to darken his eyes. "My rule is not to make a game out of intimacy."

Ron knew, of course, that this wasn't true. He just liked different kinds of games, and the idea that on the second date that he got to squeeze her tits and

maybe by date five she might brush her hand over his cock was his idea of a gigantic waste of time. She would kiss him passionately before the night was over but anytime he went to touch one of the hotspots on her body, her “good girl” would kick in and she would stop him. What was he doing here? He was truly a moonlight mile further down the road than this.

“It’s not that it’s a game. It’s what I feel comfortable doing.”

Ron smiled at her but there was sadness in his smile. “I know,” he said. “I’m sorry that I offended you.”

“I wasn’t offended,” she protested. Now she was confused. He was making her feel like she was a silly kid and she didn’t like the feeling. “I guess that I’m just a traditional girl.”

“I gave that up a long time ago,” said Ron. “I think it would be pretty impossible for me to go back to it.”

Chapter 59

It had been almost a year since Ron had spoken with Warren and he needed a conversation. He wasn’t sure why he was still going back for these talks but from time to time he would feel the need and then he would make the inevitable phone call or drive down to the college and meet with his former professor and mentor. It was a strange relationship that they had. Warren was often not particularly nice to Ron but he was always willing to see him. The conversation would be on Ron’s dime as Warren called it, at least it would start that way, but it usually transformed itself into something else. Sometimes Ron would have a specific agenda and sometimes it would be an ambiguous feeling that would sort itself out once they began to talk. The last time he had seen Warren he almost laughed out loud. Warren had dyed his hair and permed it so that it was curly. He was still rail thin and had a boyish never look older face and body.

He made the call early in the evening.

“Warren, it’s Ron.”

“How are you?” Warren drawled.

“I’m doing pretty well. How are you?”

“I couldn’t be better. I’m just back from Greece and getting ready for classes to start here in a couple of weeks.”

“I was thinking of taking a ride down.”

“That would be fine. We’re gonna be having dinner about nine here and you’re welcome to join us.”

"I'll see you then."

"See you when I see you," said Warren.

Rahway was in its late summer ripeness of green and humidity. Neither of them lived with air conditioning and so the heat was not something that they ever thought about. The screened windows were all opened a sweet evening cross breeze moved the air in the rooms. They sat in the living room in front of the dormant fire place. Warren had a glass of wine. Ron was drinking seltzer.

"You're looking very fit," said Warren.

"I've been working at it."

"What else have you been working at?"

It was always like that between them. They needed a project. Warren had admired Ron's strength when they put a new kitchen floor into Rahway together. He had heard about that side of Ron before but he had never seen it in action until that day. It was the only time that Ron could remember Warren letting him take the lead on a project and his eyes were drawn to the floor each time he passed over it.

"It's my 4th year of teaching and the first group of students that I started with is going to graduate. I feel very close to them. I'm thinking of opening myself up to them in ways that I have never done before and I wanted your advice."

"That depends on what you mean by opening yourself up?"

"I'm going to give them my home phone number and tell them that I'm there for them whenever they need me."

"You want to be careful about that," said Warren with a smile. "Students can drain you dry. They will never get enough of you and you'll find that you can't get rid of them when it's time to move on."

"Tell me what you mean," said Ron.

"I mean that their needs can leave you with nothing left for yourself. Students don't understand boundaries unless you provide them with a distinct set of rules. But the real question is why you think this is necessary."

"This is a special group of kids. They have a chance to exceed everyone's expectations for them, but some of them don't know yet what they are capable of achieving."

"That may be true but why do you feel the need?"

"I'm not sure. Why did you feel the need to do it with us?"

"I was interested in pushing the boundaries of how people lived and learned. You guys were hungry for something more and don't forget I was done teaching classes to all of you before Chris and I started this place."

"You ever think about Chris?"

"I think about him often and I still love him dearly. I believe that I saved his life although I am sure that he would not agree."

Ron laughed and lit a cigarette. "No, I'm sure that he wouldn't."

"My relationship with Chris was an attempt at true partnership. It was a mutual trust that both of us eventually violated."

"I suppose that's true." Ron sat back and thought about that.

"You didn't come here to talk with me about Chris," said Warren. "Have you heard from Robin?"

"Not since she wrote and told me that she was moving in with another guy."

"Do you think that she still had a hold on you?"

"I don't know." Ron was totally sure that he had not come here to talk about Robin. He had noticed that not one meeting between them went by that he did not mention her name. He wondered again, as he had countless times before, if Robin had ever slept with him.

"Would you say no to her if she wanted to give the relationship another try?"

"No, I'd jump at the chance."

"That's honest. Would you give up teaching if that's what it took?"

"No, I would never give up teaching. I'm sure of that."

"Teaching really is what saved you," said Warren. "Is this desire to open yourself up more fully to your students a way of replacing what it is that you wish that you had with Robin?"

Ron didn't know what to say. It was a profound insight and aside from the idea that it left him feeling weak and cast his devotion to his students in a self-serving light, he could not dispute it.

"She touched my spirit in a way that no one else ever has."

"What she did was put your spirit in a chokehold from which you have still not escaped."

"I don't think that she even realizes that."

"The question is whether or not you realize it."

Ron tried to change the subject. "You know, I use some of the techniques that you used in the classroom."

"We all borrow from each other. Sometimes we out and out steal from each other. I'm getting a little hungry here and I think that it's time to wake Janine up." Ron smiled. He liked Janine. She was Warren's other woman. When Kelly wasn't around there was always Janine. She was a tall dark-haired beauty that Chris had loved and wanted to run away with. She had turned him down and stayed with

Warren, although she had slept with him whenever Warren was up in Boston visiting Kelly. Ron knew that it had broken Chris's heart. Warren had encouraged the two of them to sleep together and Ron believed, although he had never asked Chris that the three of them, maybe with the addition of a fourth person—a female— had all slept together.

Janine kissed Ron and hugged him. "It's been so long since I've seen you, Ron. How have you been?"

"I'm well," said Ron smiling. "You look terrific."

Janine struck a pose in front of Warren and said, "See! I look terrific."

Warren drawled. "Ron hasn't seen you without your clothes on. You're getting too thin."

Dinner was just the three of them. Warren sat near the window in his accustomed spot and Janine sat in the middle. Ron placed himself in the place that he would always consider Chris's chair. They ate salad and steak. Ron wondered if Warren was eating steak every night as he did when they had the communal dinners.

Warren looked at Janine. "Did you ever want to sleep with Ron?"

She looked embarrassed by the question and didn't answer. Ron felt himself tense at the question. What kind of a thing was that to ask the girl?

"Come on," said Warren. "Did you ever want to sleep with him?"

Janine did not look at Ron. Quietly she said, "No."

"Why not?"

Ron was silent and remembered why he sometimes hated Warren.

Janine said, "Warren please stop. Please don't do this."

"He needs to hear it. Tell him."

Very quietly she said, "He belongs to Robin."

Warren smiled at Ron, who had stopped eating. Janine continued. "It's the only time that I ever saw him sit up straight."

Ron realized that he was slumping and fought the urge to sit up straight.

Warren wasn't finished. "Zoe never had a chance, did she?"

"I felt sorry for Zoe from the first time that I ever saw the two of them together."

Warren sat back. "That's why your students can give you something rare and meaningful, but you better know what you're doing before you go and open yourself up to them. You better be really certain that you know what it is that you have to offer them"

Chapter 60

At the faculty meeting that began the 1980-81 school year, Ron was introduced to the two new male teachers that would be joining the staff. Anthony Mancuso and Arnold Needlehaus were as different as night and day. Mancuso was a very young, dark haired, olive-skinned Italian kid that Ron could see the girls going completely gaga over. Needlehaus was an older gentleman with grayish white hair and a short closely cropped beard. Instinctively Ron felt that something was not quite right about this man. He was effusive and smooth, and Ron thought a bit too old to be more than a one year guy here, using the school as some kind of way station.

Sister Donna Maria introduced them both to Ron saying that he was one of the faculty leaders and that they should address any questions that they had about assimilating to the school to him. Anthony looked scared and Andrew appeared to be smug. Both new teachers stood in front of him waiting for him to say something.

"The girls are great but they will watch everything that you say and do, even more than students normally would. They'll take note of everything that you wear, and they will watch you all the time and talk to each other about you. Just relax into it and you'll be fine. They have hungry minds and open hearts. If I can be of any help, just let me know."

"What do the nuns expect?" said Needlehaus.

"Mostly that we do our job and do it well."

"Do they check lesson plans?"

"No they don't, but it's a good idea to have them for your own purposes."

"I'll probably just break out some old ones and get by using them. I retired from public school teaching last year and I don't imagine that this will be significantly different. It really is all the same, isn't it?"

Ron said, "I suppose you can look at it that way." Ron turned his gaze to Anthony. "You know the girls are gonna think of you as quite a hunk, right?"

The kid blushed visibly and said, "Is there something that I can do about that?"

"You can use it to your advantage but make sure that you create a professional distance," said Ron. As he said it he thought that it was the exact opposite from what he intended to do.

Again, Ron was in charge of the faculty council but this time it was explained at the faculty meeting that all of the lay teachers and nuns would submit their discipline referrals to him and he would keep the records of who needed to appear

because of an excess of demerits. Donna Maria explained that discipline referrals should only be used after teachers had utilized their personal, in class, discipline. Ron noted, with disappointment, that Bernadette was not a member of the faculty council and would be in charge of both the choir and first Friday Mass preparations, and the family life units that all of the girls would now be required to take. Ron saw Holly Risotto across the room, but she stayed away and did not look at him. They had not spoken since the day that he drove her home. She had appeared after Easter vacation as if nothing had happened, and Ron had been cautioned by Bernadette that it would be better for her and for him if he did not mention the absurdity of her being back in the school. She told Ron that she would keep an eye on Holly, and make sure that she did not do any harm to herself or to the girls. After lunch Ron wandered over to Bernadette's classroom. She smiled when she saw him. There was an awkward moment when they almost hugged, but they both laughed and shook hands instead.

"Did you have a good summer, Ron?"

"I did," said Ron, "but I'm glad to be back. What about you?"

"I got to spend some time back home in Philadelphia and it was good to see my family. For a while, I wasn't sure that I wanted to come back."

"Did you have a choice?"

She raised her eyebrow. "We always have choices, Ron. You must be excited. These are your girls."

Ron felt the smile spread across his face. "Yes, they are. I want this year to be special for them."

"So what are you teaching?"

"Senior English, Public Speaking, Creative Writing, Shakespeare Seminar, Sociology and Economics."

"So you are still gonna work yourself silly?"

"Is there any other way?"

"Probably not for you, no. Ron, what about your life? Do you have a girlfriend yet?"

"No one special."

"You aren't getting any younger, Ron. What are you thinking about?"

"I suppose that I'm not thinking about it at all."

"I don't believe that," said Bernadette. "Whoever she was, Ron, she was a fool for not wanting you."

"I don't know, Bernadette. Maybe it was me who was the fool."

The next day the girls arrived and Ron spent the first hour of the morning smiling and hugging them. He felt himself swelling with pride as he saw how they were growing up, about how the lights in their eyes were strong and bright and breathtakingly beautiful.

One of the improvements that Sister Donna Marie had instituted was a full school meeting that began the year. They would all meet, and then there was a much modified schedule where the girls would report to each of their classes for 10 minutes.

As each of the faculty was introduced, the girls applauded. Even for the teachers that they hated, there was polite applause. The new teachers got the benefit of the doubt and received an enthusiastic welcome, particularly Anthony Mancuso who got a few whistles that required Donna Maria to remind the girls that they were ladies. When Ron was introduced, the gym erupted in cheers. Some girls stood and cheered loudly and clapped and chanted "Tuck, Tuck, Tuck."

Never in his life had Ron been greeted in even a vaguely similar way. His cheeks burned with blush. He felt the wave of sound carry him up like he was surfing. He tried to make them stop but they kept cheering. He took his seat on the stage and Sister Donna Maria said, "I'm glad that I saved him for last. I'd hate to be the person that had to follow that."

Ron kept his head down. He could not look at them because tears were threatening to brim out of his eyes. He loved them and they loved him back. He was convinced now more than ever before. This year he would give them everything that he had to give.

There were two senior English classes that met the first two periods of the day. When they sat in the old room with the high creaky windows and the squeaky floor with just the crucifix and the portrait of Lincoln as decorations, Ron stood in back of his ever present podium with the class list. He called the roll and with each name a familiar face and story acknowledged him and there was an exchanged smile. It amazed them all how friendly the atmosphere in the class was and how happy they all were to be there. Ron could not stop smiling. The growth that had occurred over the summer, together with the potential that he saw, amazed him.

"I am really happy to see all of you. For the last couple of weeks, I have been anxious for the summer to be over and to get this started. We are going to have a great year. I'm going to drive you hard and it won't always be easy, but you all know that we will have a lot of fun too and I hope that you think that it will be worth it."

Vicky DelMarco raised her thin long arm into the air and turned her palm towards him. "Mr. Tuck, what did you do to yourself over the summer? You look almost hot and you aren't dressing as corny as you usually dress. Are you in love Mr. Tuck?" Ron laughed and came out from behind the podium. Vicky turned to look at the rest of the class for support. "See what I mean? Look at him. Wow, Mr. Tuck."

Giving her his very best dimpled grin and moving to stand right in front of her desk, Ron said, "I am in love Vicky." He took a step back. "I'm in love with all of you." They burst out laughing and he laughed with him. Vicky made a show of fanning herself with her hands. "Didn't you want me to look good for you?"

Vicky was now playing along completely. "But you know that I have enough trouble concentrating as it is." She turned to the class and made a hysterical face and rolled her Spanish eyes.

Ron lowered his voice to a whisper then he said loudly enough to project to the whole of the room. "But it will make me so sad if you don't concentrate. You know how selfish I am Vicky. I want all of your attention all of the time."

Now Vicky struck her own pose and said with fluttering eyes. "You couldn't handle all of my attention, Mr. Tuck. I'd wear you out."

The class laughed hard and the two or three girls who were new to the school sat with their mouths hanging open. This was not the type of classroom that they had ever been in before. This was not the type of classroom that they had ever even heard of before.

"Let's find out," said Ron. He turned to the chalkboard, took a breath and did it. There it was his phone number on the board. "I am here for all of you. This is my home phone number. I will give you as much energy as I have. That is my promise. What I want is the very same thing from you. I want as much energy as you have to give."

The bell rang and the girls left as soon as it did. Ron saw that some of them wrote down the number. Vicky wrote it on the palm of her hand and showed it to him on the way out saying, "Now I can't wash my hand all day."

The atmosphere in the Shakespeare seminar was different. He knew all of them and, for the most part, he had invited all of them to join this special class.

Elena Gonzalez, maybe his best student, who he had challenged since freshman year when he had called her "Frowsy" because her shirt used to come out of her skirt and her hair was a wild and beautiful dark tangle. She hadn't known what the word meant, but had looked it up that night and come into him the next day and stamped her foot in front of him and said that he had insulted her. But she

had smiled before she turned away, and that had been the beginning of a challenging relationship where he pushed her and she pushed him back to push her more. Elena was now the class president and a spokesperson for student and Puerto Rican rights.

Ron looked from her to Elizabeth Holland, a paper thin waif looking blonde who had been too timid to speak to him for the first half of 9th grade. She was always immaculately groomed and often quiet, but there was an angular quality about her and a drive that said she intended to prove herself not only to Ron and to the rest of her classmates but to her very strict mother and the rest of the world. She didn't always like Ron's teasing because she sometimes took it seriously and when she found out that it was a tease she would blush furiously and quietly steam and shoot daggers at him with her blue eyes.

She sat next to Donna Seaford who reveled in correcting Ron. She was a short girl with very black skin. Ron had once made the mistake of referring to her as an African American. She and her twin sister Deborah, who was very much her opposite, took a dual delight in telling him, with more than a little indignity, that they were Cuban, not Black.

In back of them sat Judith Wunderlan who had the face and body of a pixie. She was a bright girl who did her work and did not like to be pushed. She also did not like to ever shut up, and the two or three episodes that she had with Ron was when she had insisted on talking during class. She maintained that she was always talking about what was going on in the class, but Ron had contended that she could not talk and listen at the same time. Judith had maintained that she could.

This year Judith had vowed to sit next to Veronica Petrelli in as many classes as she could. Veronica was a good friend but very conscientious and quiet. Judith was hoping that her influence would be good for her. That was what she was saying publically, but privately she was hoping to bring Veronica more out of her shell and besides a quiet girl seldom interrupted her steady stream of chatter.

Paula Sandal felt the most insecure in this class. She had not been invited to join and she already had Tuck in three other classes. She was being "Fully Tucked" as Elena put it. Ron had spoken to her privately at the end of last year and asked her if she thought that she was overdoing it. She had answered resolutely that she had no other life and that if he could stand to have her in this many classes that she wanted to be there. Now it was here and what seemed like a good idea back then was intimidating her today. He was different and yet the same in each class. She listened and hoped that she could keep her head down here and excel in the creative writing class.

One of the other girls who had not been invited to join the Shakespeare class was Samantha Santorini. She had been dubbed as a party girl in 10th grade when she had a boyfriend who was twenty-one years old. Sister Bernadette had found out about it and tried to talk some sense into the girl. When Samantha had scoffed at the notion, Bernadette had cautioned her that boys that age would want her to “go all the way.”

Samantha had informed Bernadette that it was not only guys that age that expected the girls “to give it up” and that she had other ways of keeping them happy. Bernadette had been angry with her and cautioned some of the other girls to not follow Samantha’s example, and a war of wills had begun between the two of them. Ron, of course, was totally unaware of this. Samantha had taken this class to show Bernadette and the rest of the school that she had more than her looks going for her. She wanted them to know that she also had a brain. She was, as she liked to refer to herself, “a gift wrapped package.”

“We’re going to read eighteen plays this year,” began Ron. “Basically it’s going to be a play every two weeks, with some taking a little less time and some taking a little more. We won’t be doing Romeo and Juliet or Macbeth because you have already done those plays.”

Donna Seaford said, without raising her hand, “So this is the class where you try to kill us.”

“You could look at it that way, Donna, but what it really is the class where I show you what the pace at a good college is like.”

Then Ron showed them how serious he was by passing out a syllabus that had dates and titles of plays and testing dates mapped out for the entire year. The girls were shocked into silence by the enormity of what he had given them.

“Nope,” said Veronica. “Donna is right. This is where you kill us.”

At the end of the day, Ron felt himself filled with the energy that the girls had given him. He had no tutoring appointments because, at the beginning of the year, he usually didn’t have any students to tutor. His summer students had gone back to classes or made new arrangements. Ron drove back to his apartment and quickly changed into his running clothes and was on the track just as the football players were filling in for their afterschool practice up in Glen Ridge.

He got his first mile and a half in before they started their stretching. He saw the coaches looking at him strangely as he circled down to the field house at the end of the second mile.

Excuse me, Sir,” said one of the coaches who was wearing than traditional light gray shorts and maroon t-shirt and baseball cap.

Ron slowed and came over to him. He was annoyed at having to break his stride. "Yes?"

"Can I ask what you are doing here?"

Ron shrugged. "This is where I always run."

"I haven't see you here before."

"Usually I run in the mornings, but I'm back to school as well," said Ron. "My family lives right over there." Ron gestured to the back of the bleachers.

"You wouldn't be scouting us for another team, would you Sir?"

"Not at all," said Ron. He was flattered by the accusation. "I'd never do anything to hurt the Ridgers. Class of '67. I played for the team. My name is Ron Tuck."

Then he saw one of the assistant coaches who looked vaguely familiar. The head coach motioned the assistant over. "Richie you were class of '67 right?" Richard Westin nodded. "You remember a Ron Tuck?"

"Sure, I remember Tuck. Hello Ron, you still wearing your leather jacket and shades?"

Ron grimaced and shook his hand. "Not so much anymore, Richie."

Richie grinned at the head coach. "Ron's alright. He sure ain't no scout."

"Just stay to the outside of the track when the team gets going, Mr. Tuck. Sorry to interrupt your workout."

Ron heard Richie say to the other coaches as he started back into his run. "He wouldn't know what he was seeing anyway." The other coaches laughed and Ron felt his ears burn. It made him remember how inadequate they had always made him feel at this school. For the first time, he began to think about whether he really would enjoy coaching football.

Chapter 61

"Shakespeare is mostly a mystery. Some people think that he is a miracle. I mean here is Willy, this guy with a basic education, who winds up being able to crawl inside the minds of Kings, of Generals, of young women, of peasants. He seemed to have the ability to think like anyone that he chose to understand and explore. On top of that, he had a huge vocabulary. Additionally, he wrote great poetry. As luck would have it, he did all of this in English and we get to study him." Ron raised his eyebrows and looked at the class. Again he felt a wave of sheer joy at having the chance to work with them. "We're going to begin with a light hearted play that can also be a little confusing. It is called *Midsummer's Night's Dream*. So

our first question.” He turned to the board and wrote, “What causes people to fall in love?”

He turned back to look at them. “Come on ladies, I have 20 beautiful and intelligent young women sitting in front of me. What causes you to fall in love?”

Donna Seaford smiled with her thought and then raised her hand. “I’m pretty sure that I have never been in love, Mr. Tuck. What about you? What causes you to fall in love?”

The girls giggled. Ron felt himself flush. He thought well Donna isn’t wasting any time either. Ron thought about how to answer. He wanted to be very honest. “I think it starts with attraction and I think attraction is initially physical. Then there is compatibility. But what I think causes me to fall in love is when my imagination is touched.”

Some of the girls grinned and nodded. Others looked down. “OK, now you.”

Elena raised her hand. “I’m with Donna. I don’t think that I have ever been in love either and I’m not sure that I want to be in love. From what I’ve seen it makes people stupid.”

More Laughter. Ron grinned.

Samantha Santorini raised her hand. “I don’t know what causes it, but I know how it feels. It feels as if the world is right there in that other person, and no one else or nothing else matters. It makes you feel like your life is special. It makes you feel like no one else has ever understood you before.”

Ron nodded thoughtfully. “Those are great descriptions. But we still haven’t gotten to the question. What causes it? Is it magic?”

“I think it’s a chemical reaction,” said Judith Wunderlan. “I think that we have chemicals in our bodies that respond to certain people.”

“There is a school of thought that agrees with you Judith,” said Ron.

“This is going to sound silly,” said Veronica Petrelli, “but I think that it’s the people in heaven who look out for us and steer us towards certain people.”

“Why do you think that?”

“It’s what my grand-mother told me. She said that we fall in love because people in heaven want us to be happy, and that love gives us the chance to be really happy.”

Some of the girls smiled at Veronica and others looked down. Ron watched them trying to gauge where he would go next. “That would be kind of magical wouldn’t it?”

People nodded.

“So what happens when people fall out of love?” said Donna. “Do the chemicals wear off, or are the people in heaven fickle?”

“Another good question,” said Ron. “Let’s see what Shakespeare had to say about it.”

He moved to the tape player and began the play. He told them that they should have notebooks out and write down any questions that came to them during the scene and that he would try to get to everyone’s questions at the end of each scene. He also told them to write down the parts that confused them and that they would look at those sections together. The girls followed along in their books as the tape played. Ron read the play again along with the tape and his students. At the end of the first scene, he clicked off the tape. He looked at them for a long second. “Questions?”

“Why do parents act that way?” said Elizabeth Holland. “Why do they feel that it is necessary to decide who marries who?”

“In those times, daughters were considered the property of their fathers,” said Ron. “Marriage had economic consequences.”

Elena said, “Not just in those times, Mr. Tuck.” Some of the girls nodded sagely and Ron joined them.

“And, additionally we have the problem that Helena loves Demetrius but he does not love her but loves her friend Hermia. What does Helena say about that?”

Elena said, “Basically she is saying what does she have that I haven’t got?”

“Exactly,” said Ron. “Sort of what Sam was saying earlier. That it doesn’t matter what anyone else in the world thinks. In this case Helena was saying, who cares if I am pretty if he doesn’t think so?”

Tonight you are to finish reading at least the first act of the play. We will talk about it again tomorrow.” Ron finished just as the bell rang.

The next day Ron asked, “How did the reading go?” He was not surprised by the tentative silence that greeted his question. He thought about what he should do. “OK, there is confusion. Am I right?”

Heads bobbed. Veronica said, “I don’t think we’re ever going to be able to understand this stuff.” Ron gave her a disbelieving look. She caught the expression. “I mean it, Mr. Tuck. I read the first two acts last night and I was more confused when I finished than I was when I started. And I didn’t do my math, which is a big mistake that I’m gonna pay for.”

Ron nodded. “Ok, it’s important to do the homework for the rest of your classes. I agree. Save the reading until last. I trust that you will make a sincere effort to do it.”

Veronica smiled. "You don't have to say that. That was my fault. I should know enough to do my homework, but you make him sound so interesting and important that I just wanted to get right to it, and I got carried away."

"That happens to me too, Veronica," said Ron. "It's a lot easier to grade your papers than it is to grade some of my other classes. But you guys are also the most time consuming. So, I save what I love most till last, like dessert."

Now they were grinning at him. He had told them again that he loved them and they basked in his smile.

"But I don't believe this stuff is too hard for you. You got Romeo and Juliet. You got Macbeth. You'll get this. Those two plays are really way harder than this one is." Ron turned to the board. "We've got two different worlds going on at the same time. The worlds kind of mirror each other. The characters of the fairy world are ones that you really know."

Donna said, "I'm pretty sure that I never met anybody named Puck, Mr. Tuck. Then she grinned. Puck and Tuck rhyme. Are you really Puck, Mr. Tuck?" She laughed as she emphasized the rhyme.

Ron grinned at her and gave her his dimples. "Sometimes I am, Donna. "Do I ever trick you?"

Donna smiled broadly. "I'm here, right?"

Ron laughed and said, "Yes, you are and some of you may think that I tricked you. Like the way that I tricked you into being the good writers that you are today."

"You tortured us into that," said Elena.

Ron was having trouble not laughing again, but it was time to be serious and to turn this into something else. "Ever lose your keys and then find them in the same spot that you looked at ten times before?"

"I do that all the time with my purse," said Paula. Some of the other girls laughed and nodded.

"That's Puck, playing with you. When you stub your toe and nothing is damaged but you wind up hopping around and limping for a few minutes, that's Puck."

Samantha raised her hand. "So if I say 'Oh Puck!' I won't get into trouble? I can tell them that my English teacher said it was OK?"

Now the girls really were laughing. Ron rolled his eyes. "Just make sure that you emphasize the P, Samantha. But seriously, Puck is a trickster and he works for Oberon who is the King of the Fairies. These are not witches like in Macbeth. They don't think fair is foul et cetera, but they do like to have fun."

Ron drew two circles that touched each other. In one circle he put in the world of the fairies and in the other he placed the human world. "Both worlds depend on each other and when they interact, things get funny. Don't try to read too deeply into this play. Take it for what it is. It's a dream. It's sexy. It's funny. Don't try too much to understand it with the exception of a few lines that I will point out to you."

For the next thirty minutes Ron walked them through the plot and had them create character descriptions. When the class was coming to an end he said, "I had this teacher in college who made us write a comment on the side board before the class began. Not everyone had to write, but unless there were a certain number of comments, he would not start the class. He did it because it gave him a place to start, a way to understand what the class was thinking. We're going to do that too. We will need five comments to start the class, but anyone who makes a good comment will get a point on her next test."

As the bell rang Samantha said, "See you are a real Puck, Mr. Tuck."

Ron watched them leave and they looked content. He stopped Veronica on the way out. "I meant what I said about the reading."

She blushed and put her head down. "I lied. I got up early and did my math, Mr. Tuck."

Ron smiled. "Good for you. I still meant what I said."

Paula Sandal was hanging back, and so Ron waited until the classroom was empty. He had lunch after this class and he didn't expect any company. "I really don't think that I'm smart enough to be here, Mr. Tuck."

"Why do you say that?"

She shifted uneasily. "First of all, look at my grades and look at the grades of the other girls in here. I don't measure up. And secondly, you didn't invite me the way that you invited them."

"So, show me that I was wrong to not invite you."

"That's just it. I don't think that you were wrong. You know me really well, and if you didn't think that I could do it, you are probably right."

Ron looked into her eyes and lied to her. "I didn't invite you because you had me for so many other classes, and I thought that you would get bored."

"Really?" she said and smiled for him. "I'm not bored. I'm scared."

"Let me ask you a question," said Ron. "If you don't get an A will it be the end of the world?"

"I don't care about that. I just don't want to be the dumb kid."

"You could never be that," said Ron. "Do you think that I would allow that to happen?"

"You can't make me smart, Mr. Tuck. I know that you think that you can do anything, but you can't make me smart."

Ron tightened his mouth into a smile and nodded. Then he said, "You're gonna be fine."

When she left, he wondered if he was doing the right thing. She didn't have the grades and she was not as obviously quick. What she did have was desire. Quietly, he hoped that he was not making a mistake by not encouraging her to change classes now, when it was early enough to not be an issue.

Chapter 62

That night Ron got home after his run and made a dish of spinach pasta. Sitting at his writing table, he looked over the end of the play as he ate. He wondered exactly how far he could take them, how much he could push them so that they would realize their potential. He wanted them to stretch without breaking, and he knew that they would try to stretch until they broke in order to please him. The weight of the responsibility caused his shoulders to slump. Soon it would be time for them to start applying to colleges, and he wanted them to shoot for the stars.

A nagging voice belittled his desire. How would he know what they needed for a good school? Hadn't he worked himself to illness at the one really good school that he attended? Didn't he have to drop out of Drew University and take a year off before he finished up at William Paterson? For some of them, William Paterson would be like shooting for the stars, but he wanted better for them. They were going to be better prepared than he had been. Lashly had come from good colleges and Lashly had trained him. Maybe that was enough. They could go further than he had gone because they would start with a better foundation than he had. He needed to push the doubts from his mind. Suppose some of them did fail to make it and some of them did make it? Wouldn't that be good enough? Sure, for the girls that succeeded it would be enough for them, and he could tell himself that the others would do ok at state schools or at junior colleges. Hadn't he done ok at a junior college?

He saw their faces in his mind. Elena was a star. She was going further than he could imagine. So was Donna. He had nothing to worry about there. Veronica had a great work ethic and was bright. No need to worry about her. Elizabeth Holland was another story. She needed to make it, or she would break like a

porcelain doll that was dropped from a shelf. She might be able to be pasted back together but the tell-tale signs of the breakage would always be there. Should he push her or go easy? Didn't he owe it to her to push her if she wanted to be pushed? Wasn't it really her choice? Wasn't it any of their choices?

There was the voice again. This time it was saying that it was easy for him to say that because it relieved him of any of the responsibility of his influence on them. Samantha Satorini was pretty enough and smart enough so that she had a great chance to be a success, but was it his place to factor her looks into it?

Ron realized that he had stopped eating. The pasta was cold. He stared out his front windows into the September evening. One by one he saw their faces again and the evaluation continued. What did they want? Sure they wanted him to be proud of them, but that wasn't what they wanted from their lives.

At first he didn't hear the knock on his door. When it came again, it was louder, less timid. Ron got up and walked through the railroad rooms expecting to find a plate of leftovers at his feet, but opened the door to see Zoe standing there and smiling for him.

Ron stepped back to let her in. "Zoe, I'm surprised to see you. I thought that you'd be at school."

"Hi Ron," she said quietly. "No, I don't leave for another ten days."

He moved to kiss her and at first she stiffened and then she kissed him as gently as he kissed her. They could both feel the stir of passion in back of the kiss.

"Ron, I want to take some of my things back."

"What things?"

"The writing desk, the bookcase and Nightscape," she said biting her lip.

Ron felt his face harden. "Zoe, you gave me those things. You said that you had no money and knew that I was paying for everything and that I could have those things instead."

She sat down on the bed. "I know, but now I want them back."

Ron said, "I had Nightscape framed. It's the only piece that I have of yours. You wouldn't let me keep anything else, even though I was the model for a lot of it."

"I didn't want you to have anything else."

"Why?"

"Because it's my art, not yours."

"I know that it's yours."

"Then give it to me."

"It's a lithograph. I had it framed. You have other copies."

"I don't want anyone to have my things."

Ron felt himself getting angry. For the time that they had lived together he had basically supported her. Her father, who had a lot more than Ron, hadn't helped at all. But if she wanted it, and it made a difference to her, then maybe he should just give it to her. "I really love the piece, Zoe. Can't I just have it?"

"Can I stay here with you?"

"Why do you want to do that?"

"I miss sleeping with you. Do you have a girlfriend?"

"No."

"Are you seeing Robin?"

"No."

"Do you want to sleep with me?"

"Yes. You know that I do."

"Will you agree to give me what I want?"

Ron stared hard at her. Was she really saying what he thought that she was saying? She started to meet his gaze and then turned away.

"You can do anything that you want to do to me for a week, if you give me my things."

"Zoe, why are you doing this? I really cared for you."

"You didn't love me. You always loved Robin, or the memory of Robin."

"That's not true. When I was with you, I was with you, not her."

"Was it where you wanted to be, Ron? Was I ever the one that you wanted to be with?"

"Yes."

She looked at him with the flare of her own anger now. "You're not telling the truth. If I was the one that you wanted, you would have never let me go. You would have come up there after me, the way that you went to Minnesota after her."

Ron didn't say anything. He felt dumbstruck. All this time, he had told himself that it was her craziness that drove them apart. Now she was saying something very different.

"When I called you and didn't say anything," she continued, "all I wanted to hear was you saying that you loved me. You never said it once."

"You think that I never loved you?" said Ron.

"No, I know that you never loved me. I even slept with Quimpy to make you jealous. Quimpy of all people! Did you think that I wanted him?"

"I didn't know what to think."

"You were angrier at his betrayal than you were at mine, because it was him that you loved."

Ron was silent. Zoe's chin quivered slightly. They sat on the bed staring at each other. Time passed.

Ron said, "Do you want something to drink?"

"What have you got?"

"There's soda and some old bottles of beer that someone left when they came here."

"I'll take a beer," she said.

Ron started to get up and go to get it. She stopped him. "No, let me." She slipped out of her white cut offs and walked into the kitchen in her panties and her top. She came back carrying two of them and handed one to Ron. He took it and set it down without drinking.

"You're comfortable here. I can feel it. How's the teaching going?"

"It's great," said Ron.

"You're still at the same school?"

"Yes."

"And all the girls still think you're great?"

Ron blushed. "We get along well."

She took a long swallow on the beer and wiped her mouth with her arm. "If I got up and left, you wouldn't try to stop me, would you?"

Ron literally hung his head. "Probably not."

Then she put her shorts back on and left as silently and as magically as she had arrived, and he knew that he would never see her again.

Chapter 63

When he finished grading the papers, he had a mixed reaction. The grammar was good. Their knowledge of the play was excellent. Their essay organization was fine. Those were the good points. Their conclusions were lousy. Most of them were using what Ron called summary conclusions, where they just restated their major ideas. In some cases they used the topic sentences from their previous paragraphs. He knew it was the system that Sister Anna Lourdes taught them. It was a system and Ron could not quibble that they needed a system, but now it was time to move beyond that and use the conclusions to actually say something. He thought about how he was going to explain this, and jotted down some quick notes. That was really a pretty easy fix. The ones who understood it would get it, the ones that did not would still have well organized essays. The second problem was harder. A lot

of their ideas were his ideas parroted back. What were they going to do when they no longer had his ideas with which to work? He wanted to share his ideas with them, but he didn't want those ideas to become their thoughts. His nagging voice chided, if you didn't make them sound like the gospel of truth according to Ron Tuck maybe they would have their own ideas.

It was true and Ron didn't like it. He looked over his test questions. He had started with five quotes for which they had to supply speaker, literary devices, and an explanation of content. That was fine. He needed that to reward the girls who read the play carefully. He had given them an essay that also began with a quote. He read over his words, "Using the quote 'We are the stuff that dreams are made on,' fully explore the themes of the play, using this quote as a basis for exploration." His nagging voice said that it was a clumsy sentence. Ron pictured himself walking into the wall that he sometimes viewed language as being. Too many of the girls had just fed him back his ideas. What he wanted was their ideas. Then a thought struck him. He wrote, "Using what you know of Hermia, Helen, Lysander and Demetrius, predict what their lives will be like in five years. Your answer must include references to the play that shows the basis of your predictions." He liked it. He would have to give the next test in two parts. The first part would be the quotes, and then they could do the second part with open books. They would need more time. He thought again. He could create a two day test. He could create ten quotes for the first day and the essay would be the second day. He glanced at his syllabus to see what was coming up. It was *The Merchant of Venice*. That would be perfect. He lay back on his bed thinking that he was ready for tomorrow. Ron laughed at himself when he thought again and realized that it was Friday night. Some life you've got, said the nagging voice.

He looked at the clock again. It was almost 10pm, but it wasn't too late for *The French Maid*. Ron smiled and got himself dressed and drove down the parkway. When he got to the club, he found that it was locked shut. He was startled and wondered what had happened. He did know of another place up in Paterson. Quimpy had told him about it when he first mentioned that he was going to go-go bars. Quimpy had said, "If you want to see some really wild stuff, try a juice bar." The Nest was tucked away on a side street in South Paterson. It was run by Squirrely, a smallish man with a penchant for repeatedly wincing his glasses back up against her eyes. It was that expression and his quick sudden movements that earned him his name.

When he arrived, he was met at the door and a man sitting behind a glass partition. Ron stood in the small vestibule and reached for his money.

"You a member?" asked Squirrely.

"Not yet," said Ron.

"Twenty buys you six months membership and two glasses of soda."

Ron slid the money under the Plexiglas partition and the guy said, "I'll need to see some ID."

For a moment Ron panicked. He had always come and gone anonymously. The man saw the hesitation on his face. "We don't put up with no shit here, kid and if we know who you are you are less likely to cause trouble. We are a private club." Ron nodded. It made sense. He reached for his driver's license, careful to not show his school ID. He slipped the license under the partition.

Squirrely took it, looked up at Ron, and then wrote his name onto the list. Ron was feeling queasy. What was going to happen to the list? It was his name! He waited to see if Squirrely took any of his other information, but the guy slid his license back out under the partition, took his \$20 and buzzed him through the locked door.

The bar looked like one that served alcohol except that the barmaid was topless. She wore only a G-string and a small beret on her dark hair. Ron handed her his ticket and she brought him a glass of coke that was mostly ice. She stood in front of him waiting. He looked at her and then down at the ticket. He reached into his pocket and brought out the rest of his money. She squeezed her tits together and leaned over as he slid the dollar between them, go-go style.

Ron settled back with his soda and looked at the place. It was dark, they were all dark. The sound system was not as sophisticated as the one at The French Maid and there was an order of perspiration. The girl who was standing on the stage wore nothing. She was a little plump and had dark roots showing at the base of her blonde hair. She did not smile when she met his eyes. Ron felt instantly uncomfortable.

The music was nondescript. There were six other guys in the place. None of them seemed to be looking at the girl. Her set ended and she walked off and disappeared. She was replaced by a thin Latino girl with jet black hair and a resemblance to at least ten of his students. Ron swallowed hard. This was not what he had expected. This girl was young. She looked almost familiar. This isn't what he wanted at all. Suppose he ever walked into a place like this, and it was one of his former students? What would he do? Money or not, he had to get out of there. He slid the money back into his pocket and literally bolted out of the door. Heads turned at his quick exit. Squirrely laughed quietly.

Ron was shaking by the time that he got to his car. He felt itchy. He wanted a shower. He jumped in quickly and drove him without turning on the radio, trying not to think.

Chapter 64

“Why do you think that Jewish people have been the object of so much prejudice for so long?”

Ron started the class with this question, and as he expected, the question was met with silence. He waited to see what they would say. Lately, he had learned to become comfortable with silence in the classroom. He knew that his questions weren’t easy, and that they needed time to think if he wanted them to give thoughtful answers. It occurred to him that teachers often did not ask questions that had no right answers because they were uncomfortable with the silence that followed them. He looked into their faces. Since this was the first day of the play there were no comments about last night’s reading on the chalkboard.

“Because they are so different,” said Donna, “and they seem to think that they are better than anyone else.”

Ron waited. He knew that there would be more if he could hold out. He gazed at them. He sensed that it was not that they were confused, but that they were unsure about how they should answer. Finally Elena said, “I don’t think that I have known any Jewish people, personally.”

Ron saw a number of the girls bob their heads up and down in assent. He hadn’t considered this. They didn’t know any Jews. Then an idea struck him. “It is quite possible that Shakespeare did not know any Jewish people either. He was working from stories that he had heard. In some cases, he was working with stereotypes that had been passed down for a long time. Jews had been expelled from England a long time before Shakespeare was born, and the depictions of them were usually those of sub-human monsters, which is why, among other reasons, Shakespeare set the play in Venice. There would have been no Jews in England.”

“Where did they go?” asked Donna.

“They wandered in Europe, not being totally accepted. In some places they were forced to wear strange costumes that would mark them as Jews. In other places, such as Venice, they were not allowed to have citizenship or work at jobs. As a result, they turned to money lending, which is referred to as usury in the play.” Then he turned to the tape player and switched it on. It was the opening scene. He had them. Not like he had them in some of the more romantic plays, but that was coming and he was satisfied. The thoughts in his head as he watched them follow

the words of the actors were about how much he would acquaint them with the Jewish culture. How much would he be allowed to say? Would he be allowed to say that it was really the Italians that killed Christ? That in his head it had been one of the great bait and switches of all time to have made the Jews the scapegoats? It didn't matter. The fact was that they were going to meet their first Jew. Ron wished hard that Shakespeare's description was not so much of a stereotype, but he wanted to make sure that his audience got it. He wanted them to hate Shylock so that he could, in some ways, redeem him. Shakespeare had really boiled it down to two speeches, two monologues. The one "Hath a Jew not eyes..." and the other, the more famous, "the quality of mercy" It really all came down to those two and one of the strongest women he had ever seen on a stage, Portia.

After the first scene ended, he clicked off the tape. "One question that I want you to try to answer at the end of this play is "Why was Antonio sad?" He turned and wrote the question on the chalkboard. The girls all copied the question into their notebooks. They knew him well enough to know that it was from these questions that he would select their essays. The bell rang before Ron wanted it to ring. He said quickly, "Finish the first act for tomorrow and remember it takes five statements on the side board for us to be able to begin class." There was a groan and he answered it with a smile and then they left.

The next day, Ron began by looking over at the side board. He read: "Why do parents have nothing better to do than meddle in their kids' lives?" It was signed by Debbie. The next read, "How can she spend the rest of her life with someone based on the results of a game?" That was signed by Donna. The next read, "I don't think that it's fair to force us to read about Jews." It was unsigned. Ron stared hard at it. It was unsigned for a reason. Of course the girls knew who wrote it and he could force the issue but he decided to let it go. The next read, "What's the big deal about loaning money for interest?" That was Elena. Veronica had written a quote from the play. "All that glitters is not gold." Next to it she wrote, "Why did we all learn that it was glitters and what does glitters mean?" It was of course from the second act and it told Ron that Veronica had read ahead. She had probably read the entire play but he would be embarrassing her if he asked. And finally Samantha wrote, "I have no idea why Antonio is sad. He's rich."

Ron thought quickly about where to begin and then from seemingly out a nowhere an idea struck him. He turned to the board and quickly drew ten vertical lines. Over each column he placed a number from 1-10. "Now with ten being the highest and one the lowest, tell me how much it matters to you that your parents like the man that you will eventually marry." He had had some experience with this

process and turned to give them a caution. "Now before you lowball the answer, think of this. You are out on a date and the guy you are with tells you that on a scale of 1-10 he would rate your looks a 6." They laughed. "Would you be offended?"

"I wouldn't be offended but I would make sure that it was the last time that I went out with him."

"And why is that?"

"Who wants a guy who does not think that you are beautiful?" she said as if he must be some kind of moron.

"You didn't do that to your last girlfriend did you Mr. Tuck?" said Donna.

Everyone laughed again. "No, I did not do that. If I thought she was a 6, I wouldn't be out with her."

The girls laughed again and Ron laughed with them. As he took the vote, it split the way that he expected that it would. It was based on their mood of the moment. Some said ten and some said one. Samantha asked if there was a category for zero. There were very few in the middle. When he finished the survey, he had 3 tens, 4 nines, 3 eights, 6 twos and 7 ones.

He stared at the results. He circled the 13 low scores. "So are you saying that your family is not important?"

Elena's hand shot up. "No, I am saying that my family needs to have trust in my decisions. They need to respect what it is that I want for my life."

Ron nodded again. Donna, who was a 2, said, "I may not get married but if I did, I wouldn't want my parents choosing my partner."

"That's not the question," said Ron.

Donna smiled. "No you twisted the question around, the way that you always do."

Everyone laughed again. Ron feigned being aghast at her response. "I do not twist." They laughed harder.

Samantha said, "You probably won a twisting contest in the olden days."

Ron needed to move on. He did not want them dwelling on how he might be manipulating them. It would make it much harder to teach them if they did.

"What about my 10's and 9's here? Why is what family thinks of your prospective husband so important?"

Surprisingly Veronica raised her hand and said, "I would be lost without my family. I know it may sound weak, but I need them to like the guy that I want to marry."

"It is not at all weak," said Ron. He thought about how he responded to his mother's judgments of his girlfriends. He thought that life would be easier if she

had liked them but he also thought that if there was one that she liked that she would push him to marry her.

Elizabeth said, "I want my mother to be proud of who I choose. It would be great if she were proud of something about me."

Ron let what she said sink in. He did not want to patronize her. He realized that she wanted to express what she had said, and that in some way it had been cathartic for her to be able to say it.

"For all of you who don't like, women's liberation, let me say that back in Shakespeare's time, women were property. A man could actually beat his daughter to death for disobeying him and it would be within his rights."

"My dad would have loved living back then," said Elena.

Now Ron ran through the plot and pointed out some quotes that he suggested that the girls remember and understand. They wrote furiously. These quotes they knew would be the batch from which he would select the ones on their test. When he finished, he clicked on the beginning of Act 2.

His eyes turned to Elizabeth while they were reading and he saw that she was holding her head down and fighting back tears.

In the hall at the change of class he said to Bernadette, "What do you know about Elizabeth's mother?"

"I never met her," said Bernadette, "but I know that Elizabeth is frightened of her judgment. And I know that there is no man on the scene."

"She's a very determined girl," said Ron.

"I assume that she gets that from her mother," said Bernadette. "I think that her mother wants better for her and pushes her to excel. At least that's what it sounds like."

Ron wondered if he should find a way to meet Elizabeth's mom.

Chapter 65

Ron waited for the girls to arrive. He was anxious to see them. It occurred to him that he had never had a favorite class before, and he wondered if it was healthy. Although he was active and happy in his other classes, he did not think about them the way that he thought about the Shakespeare class. He worried that he might be short changing his other classes.

His worry vanished when he saw them coming in. Many of them moved straight to the side board and began to write before they even put their books down and before the bell rang that announced the start of the class. They were using their hall time, their free time to talk to each other, to be in his room and

write comments about the reading. It made him swell with pride as he watched them.

Samantha wrote, "Portia is cool. I like her."

Donna wrote, "Jessica is going to be an unhappy girl. This thing with Lorenzo is doomed."

Elena wrote, "The loan seems to be filled with hatred."

Elizabeth wrote, "Portia is trapped because if she does not honor her father's will, she will lose her own honor."

Helen wrote, "These people give their religions a bad name."

Ron watched the girls writing and tried hard to not notice the way that their young bottoms jiggled as they wrote so furiously. He looked down into his book. He did not want to look at them that way.

Connie wrote, "I think that Portia and Nerissa are true friends and I hope that nothing bad happens to them."

Veronica wrote, "I think I know why Antonio is sad."

Her comment startled Ron. It was a good place to start the class but it would diffuse some of their excitement over Portia. She had spun her spell on them and they were seeing themselves in her place. Shakespeare truly was an incredible genius, thought Ron. How could he conceive of this character? Then he realized that in a world ruled by a queen, it was easier to think of women as strong.

"Ok," said Ron. It seems like everyone has gotten through the first two acts. Does anyone have any questions about what is going on?"

Ron waited. No one raised a hand. He turned to Elena. "Summarize for me. What has happened?"

Elena smiled. "Well Bassanio and Portia are going to get to be together. You can just see that coming. But, Bassanio went to Shylock and they agreed on this weird loan, three thousand ducats for three months. Antonio guarantees the loan and Shylock says that he wants a pound of Antonio's flesh if he can't pay in time."

Donna interrupted. "Is that legal?" I mean, can you make a loan for that kind of repayment?"

It was a good question, almost too good. If he really answered her now, he would blow the ending. "The laws were different back then and remember, people also sold themselves into slavery to gain passage to America. Such a thing would not be legal today, but back then it was a common practice." He looked at Donna. His answer seemed to satisfy her. He turned his gaze back to Elena and the dark eyed girl continued.

“Shylock’s daughter Jessica and Lorenzo want to be together, but they have to sneak around. Oh, and I finally understand about Portia’s father’s game. If these guys make a wrong answer they have to agree on their honor to go away immediately and never marry. That makes the stakes a bit higher. So they have to really want Portia before they even ask to choose. I wish that they did not keep the answers in caskets though. That is very creepy.”

Ron smiled. “They aren’t caskets in the way that we think of the word. They just are small boxes, like jewelry boxes.”

“Oh,” said Elena. “Is there any reason that they can’t just say jewelry boxes?”

“Caskets does make it seem much more serious, doesn’t it?” said Ron. “Ok, how many of you agree with Donna and think that Jessica is making a mistake?” Ron directed their eyes over to Donna’s comment on the side board. He made a yes and no divide on the chalkboard and had the strange thought that he did it by drawing a cross. That hadn’t occurred to him before. He polled the room quickly. The class was split. The class was split ten agreeing that Jessica was making a mistake and thirteen not agreeing. Ron turned to Donna, “OK, why do you think that she is making a mistake?”

“Because of the way that he talks to her,” said Donna. “He talks down to her all the time. Wait let me find it.” She looked into the book. Ron almost popped a shirt button with the swell of pride in his chest as she went to the text to back up her assertion. She got it. She was way ahead of the curve.

Donna read, “‘Most beautiful pagan, most sweet Jew! if a Christian did not play the knave and get thee, I am much deceived.’ Donna paused. “That’s not the best example, but I always get the feeling that he is talking down to her and treating her as if he is doing her some kind of great favor.”

Ron nodded, “OK.”

“I think that he really loves her and that he doesn’t care if she is a Jew or Christian. I think that he really wants to be with her,” said Helen.

“Does anyone think that she should not go with Lorenzo other than for Donna’s reason?” said Ron.

Veronica raised her hand a little bit timidly, almost as if she was apologizing. “I think that what she does to her father is wrong. I don’t think that Shylock is a nice man but he is her father and she steals from him and she leaves him all alone. She betrays him.” Veronica was gaining strength as she talked. “And I think that it’s bad luck to start a marriage with a betrayal. And she is going to have no family for the rest of her life. These people will always think of her as the Jew’s daughter and if Lorenzo gets tired of her she will have nothing at all.”

Elizabeth shot back. "What does she have now? She's stuck with a father who treats her like a piece of shit." Elizabeth's hand flew up to her mouth and her light skinned face reddened visibly. "I'm sorry, Mr. Tuck," she said staring up at Ron. "I mean he treats her like crap."

Ron smiled in a way that let her know that she was not in any trouble. Cursing carried a penalty of five demerits and for a moment Ron was the person in charge of discipline. The class was watching him intently. "I think that we all talk differently when we are not in class. The important thing to do is to understand the difference and Elizabeth corrected herself before anyone had to point it out to her." He paused and hoped that what he said would sink in. "Now let's get back to the important stuff. Samantha, why do you think that Portia is cool? And why did you start to like her?"

Samantha grinned. "She's sarcastic when it comes to guys. She knows what you are like and she can see through your game."

Ron smiled. "I don't have any game."

Like synchronized swimmers, the girls rolled their eyes at the same time. Ron saw it and began to laugh in spite of himself. "Why else do you like her?"

"She knows what's important to her," said Samantha.

"Let's hold that thought," said Ron. "Samantha, we are going to come back to that comment at the end of the play. If I forget, I want you to remind me."

Samantha smiled as she basked in the glow of having made a positive contribution. She was thrilled knowing that one of her ideas was an idea that he wanted to save and revisit. It was just then that the bell rang. The class groaned. Ron smiled.

About an hour later, he met Sister Donna Maria in her office to review discipline. After they had settled and gone through a list of girls that were coming before the faculty council, she said, "It isn't often that I get a complaint about you, Mr. Tuck, but I got one."

Ron looked up. Her eyes were a watery, placid brown, like wet mold. "What is it, Sister?"

"Are you teaching the children about the Jewish faith?"

Ron laughed, "Not at all, Sister. We are reading *The Merchant of Venice* in my Shakespeare class."

"But did you teach them that Christians persecuted Jewish people?"

"Yes, of course."

"Why would you tell them that?"

“Well,” said Ron. “For one thing it is the truth and for another it is in the play.” Then he thought that this was going in a poor direction. He did not want her prying into the content of the plays. He was instantly and instinctively sure that she was not familiar with Shakespeare. When he had first proposed the idea, her comment had been something to the effect of ‘did he really think that the girls would have any interest in that.’ He decided to take a page out of Shakespeare’s book. “Sister, the Catholic Church is never mentioned. As you know, in England that had The Church of England. I will make sure that the girls understand that.”

Donna Maria smiled placidly. Then her smile turned to a frown. “I have also been informed that you allow the girls to curse in class. Now when I heard that, I didn’t believe it, but I think that since we are talking about it I might as well put all of my cards on the table.”

Ron looked down at the table like he was seeing the Old Maid card with her picture on it. “One time, one girl mistakenly used a crass word. It did not take the name of the Lord in vain or I would have been very upset.”

“What was the word?”

“She said, ‘shit’ and then she immediately apologized and corrected herself.”

Donna Maria sighed. “I guess that we can’t expect too much of these girls considering who they are and when they are from.”

Ron felt his face tighten. He truly did not like this woman and was seeing more and more why Bernadette considered her dangerous. “That’s true, Sister.”

“Who was the girl?” said Donna Maria.

Ron scratched the back of his head. “Gee, I can’t even remember.” Then he paused. “You did put me in charge of these kinds of offenses, Sister.”

“Yes,” said the principal thoughtfully but it is important that I also know who the rabble rousers are.”

Ron squinted as if he was trying to remember what he was really doing was trying to keep himself from saying what he thought, which was that she would consider anyone with a brain and an original thought a troublemaker.

Chapter 66

It wasn’t so much that he dreaded the weekends, as it was that he felt lost during them. Ron sat at his desk, on Friday night, thinking about his life. He felt as if the changes that he was going through were profound. In his mind, he pictured himself walking the halls and grounds of the various college campuses that he had haunted. He had always kept his eyes focused on the girls that he had seen. He had

always wanted to meet them. There were never too many girls, even when he had been with Robin or Zoe or anyone else. He felt that was behind him now. He was not going to be looking for a girl, not ever again. He had decided that from now on he would wait to be found rather than look for someone that he wished to find. He had grown tired of the endless desire. It had not served him well. As he thought about it, he realized that anytime something had worked out, it had been by accident, or he had been the one who had been pursued. Hadn't Robin told him that she had watched him for weeks before she had been able to get his attention? Hadn't he met Zoe when meeting a girl was the last thing on his mind? Hadn't his other encounters with women been a series of comical mishaps? It was time for it to stop. What was the saying about staying in one place and letting the world come to you? Ron had gone off looking for the world and each, and every time that he had done that it had worked out badly. Maybe the truth was that he did not like himself well enough to want anyone who wanted him. Maybe what he needed to do was just wait and see what it was that life had in store for him instead of seeing it like a gigantic treasure hunt.

These insights did not make him happy. He saw himself as damaged beyond repair. He was like his knees. Once his speed had been one of his best attributes as an athlete, but it was only when he had learned to accept their damage and stop trying to pretend that he had not been injured that he was able to get himself into the shape that he was in today. He had gone out looking for the perfect job, but it was not until his mother had taken the step that he had resisted and sent out his resume that he had come to Our Lady of the Forlorn. It was not as if he had nothing. He had his teaching and he was sure that it would sustain him for a long time. It was about 11pm when the phone rang. Ron had been thumbing through his copy of Shakespeare's plays and lying on his bed. He had no idea who could possibly be calling him.

"Hello."

A soft, scared voice said, "Mr. Tuck, it is Elena."

Ron felt a jolt. "Elena, what's wrong? Can I help you?"

"I need your advice, Mr. Tuck."

"OK."

"I am with my boyfriend Junior. He is in the other room and I don't know what to do."

"Just tell me what is wrong," said Ron.

"He wants me to do it and I said that I would and now I'm scared."

"Why are you scared?"

"I don't know. I think that I'm just being silly."

Ron nodded. His mind raced. "If you are scared, then maybe you aren't ready."

"What do you mean?"

"There is a lot of pressure on you Elena. You are still very young. There really isn't a reason to rush."

"A lot of the girls in class talk about doing it with their boyfriends. I feel like I'm being stupid."

"Maybe you are being very smart."

"What do you mean?"

"Doubts are often a good thing, Elena."

"I don't understand."

"I think that you are calling me, because maybe you don't want to and want me to tell you not to."

Ron bit his lip. He sounded just like Lashly, telling a student that she didn't really know what it was that she wanted. One difference a reassuring voice said in his head was that he wasn't going to have Elena come to his house so that he could show her how to do it.

"You think that is it?"

"I really do, Elena."

"Then I'm not going to do it."

"Whether you do or not has to be your decision and it can't be because Junior will get mad if you don't, or that the other girls will think that you are strange because you don't. When you are ready, I promise you that you won't be calling me or anyone else."

"Thank you, Mr. Tuck. I think that was really what I needed to hear."

"Alright Elena. You can call back whenever you need to call."

"You are wonderful, Mr. Tuck. Why can't my boyfriend be like you?"

Ron laughed. "Cause he isn't as old as I am."

Elena said softly, "He is only three years younger than you are."

Ron frowned. This was not some eighteen year old guy trying to talk his girlfriend into giving it up. This was a grown man with one of his students. His face hardened. "If there is any problem when you say no, call me and I will come and get you."

"There won't be a problem, Mr. Tuck but thank you for looking out for me." Then she was gone. Ron hoped that he had said the right things to her. He stared at the ceiling for a long time before he drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 67

On Monday morning, Ron began class by drawing a cross on the board and dividing it, not by yes and no as was his normal way, but with the words 'love and justice. He did not look at the side board although he knew that there were many comments there. While some students took the weekends off, Ron had learned that his were very diligent at accomplishing their lessons over the weekend. They had confided to him that in many instances that they were not allowed to go out and that they could get out of doing housework by claiming that they had school work which needed to be finished.

"Would you prefer to live in a world that is governed by love or a world that was governed by justice?" he asked.

Ron almost fully expected that the girls would almost unanimously vote for a world where love was in charge and was at a loss to explain when the vote came back evenly split between the two choices. He looked at them very thoughtfully. He circled the group that had voted for justice. "Then you believe that Shylock was treated fairly?"

Donna's hand shot up like a bolt. Before he could even acknowledge her, she said, "That wasn't justice! That was prejudice!"

Ron smiled. "What do you mean?"

"Well the judge does not even try to hide the fact that he hates Shylock."

"That's true," said Ron. "But is he impartial?"

"He claims to be but that is a joke. He was looking for any way to overturn the bond."

"Doesn't Shylock demand the 'letter of the law' and isn't that what he gets?"

"Yes, but isn't the purpose of the law to help everyone to be treated fairly?"

"Is it?" said Ron.

"It should be!" countered Donna.

Ron nodded. "You are correct. It should be. I want you to think about your history classes for a moment." The girls groaned and Ron was shocked at the reaction. "What?"

Elena said, "History is no fun, Mr. Tuck." She looked at him with her eyes twinkling in the secret that the two of them now shared.

"Haven't our laws always been a reflection of our prejudices?"

The girls were silent. Elizabeth who had also voted for justice said, "Then there is nothing to trust except love. Is that what you are saying?"

"No," answered Ron. "Love does not even attempt to be fair. We treat those that we love much differently than we treat anyone else."

"So what's the right answer?"

"You tell me," said Ron. "It's there. It's right in the pages."

Veronica smiled broadly and put her hand up. "The mercy speech by Portia."

Ron smiled and said, "Let's look at it together." Ron read the speech as the girls followed along. He read it slowly. He reread the words, "... in the course of justice, none of us shall see salvation..."

Ron paused to let the words sink in. Then he said, "Why doesn't Shylock take three times the amount of money that is due him?"

Paula Sandal said, "Because he hates them and he wants to get back at them."

Ron nodded. "Why else?"

Judith said, "Because of his daughter."

Ron nodded again. "Why else?" He felt uneasy about saying this because those were the two reasons that he wanted. Sometimes he would push beyond what he expected them or him to know and had this kind of blind faith in the power of the classroom to provide an answer. Victoria didn't make him wait long.

"He is sticking up for all the Jews."

Ron smiled. He had not thought of Shylock as seeing himself as a standard bearer but there it was and it seemed to ring true.

Elena said, "Do you think that Shakespeare secretly liked Jews, Mr. Tuck?"

"What I think is that Shakespeare, in his writing, wanted us all to treat each other better. But let me ask you this. How would Shylock know what mercy looked like or felt like? Had anyone shown him mercy? If you were trying to leave this room and every time that you almost got out, I swung down and kicked you in the teeth and knocked you back into the room, wouldn't you want to beat the hell out of me if you finally did get out?"

Elena said, "So, Portia is asking Shylock to give something that he has never been given."

"So why does she do that?" said Ron.

Paula said, "Because she wants him to be better."

Paula had just started volunteering answers and the last thing that Ron wanted to do was to shut her down.

"That is partially true. Why else?"

Donna's face lit up. She pointed to the love side of the vote. "Because she is in love with Bassanio and wants to get Antonio off."

Ron was having trouble containing his smile. "Do you think that she really cares about Shylock at all?"

There was a soft chorus of “no” in the room.

Ron returned to the board and looked out at them. In this space he felt that somehow he was inside of the play, moving in it like an observer, almost like a director. He drew another cross. “Does Shylock get what he deserves?”

The vote was swift. There were fifteen who said yes and seven who said no. Ron circled the minority and walked away from the board without saying anything. They knew what it meant.

Veronica said, “He should be punished for what he has done, but they don’t leave him with anything, not even his friends or his religion.”

“That’s true,” said Ron. “If he becomes a Christian, his fellow Jews will think of him as dead.”

“I want to change my vote,” said Judith.

“Ok,” said Ron. “Why?”

“Cause if I don’t, I won’t be any better than they are.”

Other girls said, “I want to change my vote too.”

Ron grinned at Judith. “See you are a real trendsetter.”

She beamed.

“But that doesn’t make Shylock any better of a person, does it? And Shakespeare leaves him this way. In some ways what Shakespeare is saying in his own Christianity is that Shylock had a shot at redemption and turned it down, which is why a lot of critics have said that Antonio is like a Christ figure in the play. You may want to write that down.” Dutifully the girls wrote.

Ron went back to the chalkboard and said, “OK, let’s switch gears here.” He circled those who had voted for the world governed by love. “What happens in the courtroom between Bassanio and Portia?”

Samantha said, “He digs himself into a really deep hole.”

“Why?”

Samantha gave him that look that again displayed disbelief at his inability to understand. “He gives away his ring!”

Ron grinned. “So?”

“Has a girl that you loved ever given you a ring?” said Samantha.

Ron looked down at his finger. There was silver ring with Minnesota jasper in it on the third finger of his left hand. Robin had given it to him when he first moved to Minneapolis, before he knew that she was sleeping with her cousin, before things had gotten really crazy. He dutifully wore the ring every day. He thought of her each time that he slipped it on his finger. “This one,” he said holding up the finger.

“How would she feel if you gave it away to another woman?” said Samantha.

Ron felt his eyes fill up instantly. He fought the reaction. Not here! Not in front of his students. The girls saw his face and the room became very quiet. Ron tried to smile and he shrugged. “I doubt that she would care very much anymore,” he said. The room was very quiet. The floor creaked as Ron moved across it. “But she also would probably not try to trick me into giving it away.” He was trying to get it back, trying to will his mind away from that place and back to his students. He felt himself close a door. For a moment, he heard laughter across the hall. It made him flinch. “OK,” he said. “Now the first thing that Bassanio does is to tell Portia, who he does not know is Portia, that he would give her up if that would help to get Antonio off the hook for the pound of flesh.” Ron read the passage. “The next thing that he does, and Portia has already said that she was going to leave at this point, is to keep asking her if there is anything that he can give her. And that puts it in her head to ask for the ring.”

“Yup,” said Donna. “He’s a dope.”

“Well,” said Ron, “he is not as smart as she is.”

“That’s an understatement,” said Donna. “But I have a question. How could he not know who she was?”

“Because the court was a man’s world and he would never have guessed that a woman could conduct herself in there the way that Portia did.”

“Yup,” said Elena. “A real dope.”

The bell rang. The class groaned. Ron smiled. “Act 5 is very short so it’s almost like you have a free night, but remember as soon as we finish the play, we have the test.”

Chapter 68

Looking straight at Veronica Ron said, “Ok, why is Antonio sad?”

Veronica grinned and opened her notebook. She turned back a few pages. “I think that he is sad because he does not love his life and he knows that it is the only one that he has and he is dissatisfied with it.”

Ron was struck first by the simplicity of her insight. He nodded slowly and made a cross on the board, labeling it with a Y and an N.

“How many of you agree with Veronica?”

As he took the poll, he realized that he had made a mistake to do it this way. By identifying the statement as belonging to Veronica, the poll became a referendum on her and it wasn’t going to get him anywhere. It was unanimous in

favor of agreement. He stopped. There was no place to go with a vote like this unless he took the opposing point of view. He didn't want to do that. "What is missing in his life?" he said.

Donna grinned as she raised her hand. "I personally think that he is a little bit too sweet on Bassanio."

There was a scattering of "Ewws" in the classroom. Ron looked at Donna and said, "Why do you think that?"

Donna answered with a strong and confident voice. "Bassanio is the only one that he wants to see before he thinks that he is going to die, for one thing."

"That is true," said Ron. "Anyone else have an idea?"

Veronica's hand went back up into the air. She began speaking as soon as Ron made eye contact with her. "I think that he has taken his life for granted and that it's only when he is faced with losing it that he realizes that he has another chance. I think that Shakespeare put him through this so that he could learn that his life was important."

"Why do you believe that he didn't understand that his life was important?"

Elena chimed in. "The bond. Who makes that kind of deal about a debt? It had to be that he just didn't care."

Ron was stunned. He had read this play at least six times and he had never come to these conclusions, but now they looked real and true and he believed them to be accurate insights. "I think that you may all be correct. And I think that I have never had these thoughts about the play before." He grinned at them proudly and they grinned back at him just as proud of themselves as he was of them.

"OK," he said. "Let's move on to the rings and what Portia does back at Belmont."

Samantha said, "She's just having fun with him."

He exaggerated a face of being aghast and in pain. "That was your idea of fun?"

The girls giggled. Elizabeth said, "Mr. Tuck, do you remember back in freshman year when we read *The Odyssey*?"

Ron smiled. "Yes."

Elizabeth continued, "Didn't Penelope do the same thing to Ody?"

They laughed remembering the name that he had given them to use because they had trouble saying Odysseus. "What do you mean?"

"At the end of the story, when she tests him and tells her maid to bring their bed so that she can sleep with him," said Elizabeth.

"Both events are very much related. Except of course that Odysseus was gone for 20 years and she wanted to make sure that it was him."

Elizabeth blushed but held her ground. "She knew it was him. She wanted to make sure that he hadn't taken her for granted and Portia is doing the same thing here."

"Wow," said Ron. "I should just sit down and let you guys teach the class to yourselves."

Paula looked at him as if he was serious. "We couldn't do this without you," she complained.

Ron smiled. "Yes, you can and you're gonna."

He spent the rest of the class reviewing and giving them a pool of quotes from which he would choose his questions. He made the pool huge, including at least thirty quotes from which he would choose ten. Even if they just studied those quotes, they would be ready. Then he told them about the new testing formula that he was going to use and he saw them get nervous again. He explained that he did it so that they would have more time to express themselves and feel less pressure. They were not convinced.

Standing with Bernadette, in the hall between classes, he said, "I just had the best class that I have ever had with these kids. They are something special."

Bernadette's dark eyes looked into his face. Her expression was worried. "Do you think that you might be putting too much pressure on them?"

"No," said Ron quickly.

"Are you raising their expectations too high, Ron?"

"Why are you asking that?"

"Because I think that some of these kids are going to fail to live up to your expectations of them and what happens to them then? You get a new batch of kids to teach. What do they get?"

Ron felt slapped. He actually took a step back. "Is that what you think that I'm doing?"

"I'm worried that you might be getting carried away," she said.

"Have you spoken to them about colleges?"

"A little bit."

"Did you tell Elena that an Ivy League school would not be out of the question?"

"I didn't have to tell her. She already knew. But I certainly didn't discourage her."

Bernadette rolled her eyes. "Come on, Ron, an Ivy League school? And even with affirmative action, if she did get in, do you think that there would be any way that she could possibly make it in that kind of an environment?"

"Yes, I do."

Bernadette's face was hard. "Whose dream is that Ron, yours or hers?" Saying that she turned and went back into her classroom. Ron stood and watched her go feeling very confused. A moment ago he had been riding along on the wave of their learning. He was feeling like he was finally doing some real good and now he felt incredibly insecure. Bernadette had never said anything like that to him before.

At lunch, he walked the streets around the school and smoked cigarettes. The leaves were the spectacular variety of colors that he remembered from his childhood. The light was soft as if filtered through them. He wanted to do what was right. He believed in them. They believed in him. Did they believe in him too much? Did he have unrealistic expectations for them? Was he setting them up for failure? Did he just want to think that he was some kind of magical person who could come back to Newark and change the way that things were? Was he a fool? He thought of the Blake proverb about the fool persisting in his folly and becoming wise. Did the fool become wise by learning that he had been a fool? He did not want his wisdom to come at their expense. He was quite sure that he could never forgive himself that.

At the end of the day, Bernadette appeared in his doorway. He had sleepwalked through his afternoon classes. He could not stop thinking about it. "I was cruel to you," she said.

He looked up and said, "No, you were telling what you believed. That's not being cruel."

"What do you think I was telling you?"

"I think that you were saying that I might be doing this for myself more than I am doing it for them."

"That's how I thought it sounded too. I was just upset."

"About what?"

Bernadette came into the room and closed the door. "I got a letter from Irene Emanuel."

"How is she doing?"

Bernadette moved deeper into his room. "She was worried about the way that she left and she was worried about you."

"Me?"

"She said that I should look after you and help you to not burn yourself out."

"I miss her," said Ron. "I really wish that I understood why she just had to go like that."

"If I tell you something you have to promise me that you will never tell anyone under any circumstances." Ron looked at her quizzically. She paused and waited for him. He nodded. "Do you remember that man whose body they found in the basement just before she left?" Ron nodded again. "Did you know Father Joyce?"

"He baptized me when I converted back when I was 13. I studied with him."

"Did you like him?"

"No, he was cold and never smiled."

"You were too old for his taste. Lucky you!"

"What do you mean?"

"Irene Emanuel was poking around in the basement trying to figure out what had happened. She couldn't stop wondering what this man was doing down there and why he went there to die. She found a bunch of pictures of Father Joyce and the boys from the second grade Indians Club. Some of the boys had no clothes on. It wasn't a hobo Ron. It was a former student. He went down there to kill himself"

"What?"

Bernadette nodded. "She took the pictures to the Rectory and shortly after that both she and Father Joyce were transferred."

Ron sat with his mouth hanging open.

"Some things here are never what you think that they are, Ron."

End of Part 3

Part 4

Chapter 69

Sitting in Quimpy's living room where there was little heat, Ron watched the NCAA Basketball Championship game with Quimpy and two of his friends, Roger and Eli. He had hung out with Roger before. They were both English teachers, but Roger had grown so depressed at the idea of grading papers that he was developing a nervous condition that caused him to break out into hives whenever he gave his

class an assignment. As their football Sundays went on, Ron would see the red splotches begin to gather on Roger's neck and he would dig at them with his fingernails and grow more sullen. Silently, Ron had hoped that he would never become like this and wondered how Roger could possibly be doing his best for his students when they very thought of reading their words made him sick. Once he had brought a stack of papers with him to read as they watched and Roger had lost the color in his face as he saw Ron begin to shuffle through the pages and read and smile and share a comment that one of his students had written. When he could not take it anymore, Roger said to Quimpy, "If he's gonna keep doing that, I'm going to go home."

Quimpy had responded by breaking out one of his special, saved jar of Thai sticks and after a few puffs Ron was too stoned to read anymore and had put the papers away. After that, Ron had little respect for Roger and never mentioned his teaching or his students again. Secretly, he told himself that Roger was just one of those public school teachers who was in for the money and should have been doing something else.

Quimpy had tried to soothe Roger's disturbed equilibrium. "You know Ron, he's still just an idealistic fuck up who thinks that someday we are going to have a cultural revolution." They had both laughed at Ron's naiveté, and Ron had responded by smoking more of the Thai stick that Quimpy would have thought imaginable.

However, this was the first time that he had met Eli, who was Quimpy's mentor and hero. Like Warren, Eli was from North Carolina, but unlike Warren, he spoke very slowly and utilized long pauses in his patterns of speech that caused most people to want to interrupt and finish sentences for him. Eli had retired from teaching and had a house on top of a mountain. He was married to one of his former students, who was thirty-five years his junior. He had been a legendary tennis coach. Quimpy had explained to Ron that Eli was a true genius and that it was impossible to understand the way that he truly looked at the world. Ron felt that he had seen this act before.

The game pitted two legendary coaches against each other, Dean Smith from North Carolina and Bobby Knight from Indiana. Smith was a gentleman and Knight was a raving lunatic. Ron was the only one in the room who thought that Indiana was going to win. Eli had been shocked by Ron's opinion and asked him to explain.

"Smith is a pussy," said Ron in way that was sure not to endear him to Eli. "He has no killer instinct. Knight will just put his foot on your throat and stomp the life out of you without thinking that it should be any other way. Smith wants to be

elegant. He wants to be well thought of. Knight just wants to beat the shit out of his opponents.”

Eli sat back. “That is a rather vivid,” he paused, “interpretation, another pause, “of how to...” he changed his position on the chair “...play a game.”

Ron smiled. Quimpy shook his head with silent grinning laughter.

Roger said, “Dean Smith is a brilliant tactician.”

“For a pussy,” said Ron.

“Quimpy tells me... that you... are a teacher, Ron?”

Roger stiffened. Quimpy said, “Ron teaches in a Catholic School.”

Eli smiled. “Well, that explains a lot, doesn’t it?”

Quimpy and Roger laughed. Eli puffed on his pipe. Ron lit a joint.

It was a Monday night and he was making an exception. He never went out during the week, but since this was pretty much the extent of his social life and the championship game was a big deal, he had decided to come. He was already regretting it. It was late and he wanted to be home and settling in with his papers and thoughts of his next day. But he knew that he had to start going out some of the time.

At the half, Indiana scored on a long shot that put them up 27-26 for their first lead of the game. The halftime show was dedicated to an update on the condition of Ronald Reagan who had been shot the day before. Surgeons had successfully removed a bullet and the President was said to be doing very well.

Quimpy, who actually was an acknowledged intellect on JFK in Dallas, was explaining that he thought that Reagan had been set up by the secret service to teach him a lesson. Quimpy believed that Reagan had somehow pissed the wrong people off and that a bullet in him was scheduled to get his attention and to put him back on track. Eli contended that it was in this case just an ill-mannered lunatic who thought that he knew what was best for the country. Looking over at Ron, he added, “Not unlike...in spirit... the essence of the way that you describe ...Bob Knight.”

Ron just said that he didn’t like Reagan but hoped that he would live. “I just don’t want to ever see another American President killed.”

Roger said, “They’re all no good fucks anyway.”

In the second half, Indiana got off to a slow start but then routed North Carolina. Ron felt vindicated. As soon as the game ended, he slipped out and drove home and went to bed as quickly as he could so that he would be ready for his real life in the morning.

Before he left, Eli congratulated him on his analysis and said that it had been a pleasure to meet him. Ron was a little taken aback. He knew that perhaps he hadn't been fair to Eli. He had been too guarded to take anything that the guy said at face value. He had shaken his hand and said that he had enjoyed meeting him very much. As he lay in bed, trying to go to sleep, he wondered if Rahway had damaged him with respect to meeting new people. They had been so sure that what they were doing was new and exploratory, but now it seemed that they made each other unhappy more than they did anything positive for each other.

Chapter 70

Elena and Veronica sat in Ron's classroom. The building was emptying out. Each of them was holding a red library book that Ron had gotten for them.

"It's a lot of work," he said. "And you both know already that you are getting great grades from me. This isn't about that."

"I think it would be fun," said Veronica.

"You have the harder decision to make," said Ron. "It's not going to be easy to play all of these male roles."

Veronica grinned. "I know I'm a girl, Mr. Tuck. It's not like you have two guys in front of you and you are asking one of them to play all the female roles."

Ron smiled. "Two guys would never have the guts to do what I am asking the two of you to try to accomplish."

"Do you really think that we can do it?" said Elena.

"I'm gonna be honest with you. I'm not sure. I directed one play in college and I acted some back then, but I never tried anything like this before."

Elena grinned. "We have no scenery, no budget, no stage and most of the teachers in the school thinking that we can't do it. What's the problem?"

The three of them shared a conspiratorial grin. But what Elena was saying was true. For the first time, Ron was really out of favor with both the nuns and the other teachers. When the college admissions letters started arriving, the school was at first shocked and then pleased and then distrustful and now resolutely convinced that Ron had somehow conspired to have these girls apply to colleges that were way over their heads. Bernadette and Ron had their most heated argument ever, and now they were barely speaking to each other. It had started because of Elena. Two months earlier she had burst into Ron's classroom before

the day began waving a letter from Princeton. It said that she had been accepted and that the school wanted her to visit and meet with a financial aid counselor to help her to work out a financial package. Bernadette and Ron had been having coffee in his class. Ron was thrilled when he heard the news. He hugged Elena and she said, "I could never have had the guts to do this without your help."

Ron said, "You have brains and talent and you can do whatever it is that you decide that you want to do." They were the same words that his mother had always said to him when he was facing a challenge.

Elena turned to Bernadette. "Isn't it great, Sister?"

"It's a lovely honor," said Bernadette with a tight lipped smile.

"They said that I can bring two guests with me. Will you come, Mr. Tuck? My father said that he would come with me."

Before Ron could answer, Bernadette said, "What about your mother?"

"She doesn't mind and I really want you to meet my father, Mr. Tuck. My mother will visit lots after I start going there."

"Elena, I would be really honored to go, but I think Sister is right. It should be someone else from your family."

"I already told them that I wanted you," blurted Elena.

"Then it's me you get," said Ron smiling. She hugged him and ran off.

Bernadette was very quiet after she left. Then she stood and said, "Are you really sure that you know what you are doing?"

"What do you mean?"

"Rutgers, yes. Montclair State would be better, but I could understand Rutgers. She has a full scholarship to St. Josephs. But you've convinced that girl that she can go to Princeton."

"She can go to Princeton."

"And how is her family supposed to manage that?"

"I'm thinking that she is going get a full ride."

"She's not that bright, Ron. She's clever and she works hard and she has overcome the cultural disadvantages, but you had to have her shoot for the moon." Ron's face hardened. "Not only her. Wait until the rest of the acceptances come in. Wait until you see the colleges that these girls are going to get into."

Bernadette made a fist and pounded it down in the air like she was striking an imaginary table. "Getting in is not the point!" She raised her voice. "This is more about you than it is about them. You just refuse to see the realities."

"You're right," Ron shot back, "because their realities suck. They need dreams, and they can make some of those dreams come true."

"What you really mean to say is that you can make their dreams come true."

"I can help," said Ron.

"You did help! But that wasn't enough for you. You have to think of them as extraordinary because you want to be extraordinary."

Ron stood with some amount of defiance in his posture. "Maybe we all are, Bernadette."

That was really the last meaningful conversation that they had. When Veronica got into Rutgers and Elizabeth got into NYU and Donna decided that she would attend Brandeis, Bernadette avoided Ron more and more. They no longer had coffee and even the girls noticed that their two favorite teachers were not as friendly as they had once been. They speculated that Ron and Bernadette had been lovers and that now they had broken up. Bernadette used to speak glowingly of the guy across the hall, but now she never mentioned him. And Ron seemed to never be with her in the mornings anymore.

"Take the play home and read it over. We need to make a decision by the end of the week and then I have to get permission for us to do it."

The next morning Ron met with Sister Donna Maria and explained his plan. She looked at him with startled eyes. "You want to do a Shakespeare play?"

"Not exactly," said Ron. "It's a collection of Shakespeare scenes that have been put together on a theme. It's called Shakespeare's World of Love."

Sister Cheesy got up from behind her desk and began to pace. She tugged at her waistband and then at her headpiece. "I don't understand your need to do these things, Mr. Tuck."

"What do you mean, Sister?"

"Your creative writing class is doing a literary magazine is that not right?"

"Yes, but we are doing that as part of the class and I am paying for the paper. It is only costing the school the price of the ink."

"And now you want to do this?"

"I'm not sure that I see what one thing has got to do with another," said Ron. She threw up her hands in exasperation. "Where are we supposed to put this play on? We have no stage."

"I think that we can do it in the gym."

She looked at him with disbelieving eyes. "And just who would we put this play on for, Mr. Tuck?"

"I was thinking that we could do it for the other students and maybe the eighth grade kids. It could be good public relations for next year's incoming class."

"It could also be a disaster that humiliates everyone involved."

"Ok, tell you what. We'll put it together and show it to you and some of the other teachers. If you don't think it's good enough, we won't do it."

"No, no, that's not a good idea. Word will get out about what you are doing and then if the students don't get to see it, we will look like the bad guys."

"Have you spoken to Miss Scarpelli about using her gym for this activity?"

"No Sister. That would be presumptuous. I came to you first."

"She looked at him with exasperation. And you would never be presumptuous would you, Ron?"

"Look, I'm trying to do a good thing here. I'm trying to get the kids excited about learning and to show them that it can be fun too."

"And you aren't forcing these girls into this?"

"Not at all," he said. "They are both top students. They don't need the grades. They are both accepted into colleges."

"Well I can't fault your enthusiasm. But why Shakespeare?"

Ron looked at her evenly and said, "Because no one else thinks that they can do it."

"Have you ever contemplated the sin of Pride, Mr. Tuck?"

"Being proud of these kids is no sin Sister."

"We have no money to give you for this."

"I know that."

"Well," she threw up her hands in an expression of exhausted defeat. "Get started and let's see how it goes, if Miss Scarpelli agrees. I'm not commandeering her classroom for this effort."

Grace Scarpelli was a short woman in her late 20's with reddish brown closely cropped hair, freckles and a slight twist to her nose that gave her face an unusual contour. Ron didn't know her at all but was fairly certain that she was gay. They had said hello over the years and once shared a cafeteria duty. She kept to herself and had been there longer than Ron.

Ron made his way over to the gym with some sense of trepidation. She was sitting in her office with the school nurse when he arrived.

"Hi, Grace."

"Hello, Ron. You don't often make it down to this part of the school."

"I know," said Ron, feeling a blush heat his face. "They keep me pretty busy up on the other end."

Grace laughed. "I'm sure that they do."

The nurse stood up. "Well, I've got to get back to my office. We can finish this up tomorrow Grace."

"Hello Mrs. Babio."

"Hello and goodbye, Mr. Tuck," said the nurse without smiling.

Ron felt slapped and he was not sure why. He explained to Grace what he wanted to do and watched with delight as she said that she thought that it was a cool idea, and also that she thought that he was crazy for doing it.

"Well that seems to be the popular opinion," said Ron.

"You know that they all will be watching and waiting for you to fall on your ass so that they can say that they told you so?"

"Yeah, I know," said Ron. He was a bit startled by her language. But what the hell, it won't be the first time that I've fallen on my ass."

"When do you want to rehearse?"

"We're going to come in an hour before school starts."

Grace Scarpelli chuckled. "You are a glutton for punishment, huh?"

"I guess," said Ron. He would have agreed with anything that she said right about now.

"You won't be in my way," Grace shrugged. "Good luck with it."

Ron reached out to shake her hand. It was warm and soft and she stood closer to him when he slid his palm into hers. "I appreciate it," he said.

Chapter 71

Over the next week, they practiced each day for an hour. Veronica had a car and picked Elena up each morning. Ron was always there waiting for them. He measured out a stage area on the floor and marked it off with strips of packing tape. They worked on the number of props that they would need and what props they would pantomime.

The scenes of the play consisted of a scene between Ferdinand and Miranda from *The Tempest*. Ferdinand had been given the job of moving wood by Miranda's father, a wizard named Prospero and she had come to watch him work. Next was a scene from *Henry the Fifth* where Henry attempts to tell the French princess Catherine that he wants her. This scene was complicated by the fact that she did not understand English. Luckily, Elena had taken French and could read the lines very well. Ron marveled at her fluidity, thinking that she now spoke three languages as well as he spoke one. Then there was a scene between Petruchio and Kate from *The Taming of the Shrew*. The next scene was from *Richard the Third* when Richard tells the widow of a man that he has killed that he is going to marry her while she

is on the way to bury her husband. Finally there was the scene between Othello and Desdemona, where he strangles her.

They would need chairs. They would need a couch. They would pantomime the wood. Each morning they read through the scenes and Ron timed them. There were also five connecting scenes where the two actors would tell the audience what it was that they were going to see.

Elena said, "Mr. Tuck, what are we going to do about costumes?"

Ron was silent and thoughtful.

Veronica said, "I was thinking that I would tape my chest with an ace bandage. You know so that I don't show."

Ron smiled and said, "That's a good idea, Veronica. He didn't say that she was flat-chested enough so that it would not be necessary. Ron noticed that Grace Scarpelli began arriving and watching some of their rehearsals as she drank her morning coffee.

"Well," said Ron. "I think that black tights for all the scenes with the actors between the Shakespearian scenes and then we can just add some things to that foundation for the scenes. Do you think that we should give you a moustache or a beard, Veronica?"

She nodded. "I think it would help me to feel less like myself, Mr. Tuck."

At the end of the week, Ron said, "Ok, we have a feel for this but we can't really start to act until we memorize the lines. So, let's try to have the first scene ready to recite on Monday."

Ron watched as both girls' mouths fell open. He said, "You didn't think we were going to use the books on stage, did you?"

The girls couldn't seem to close their mouths as they shook their heads no. As they were leaving to go to classes, Grace said, "Ron, I need a favor from you now."

Ron stopped. The girls left the gym. Ron stood there holding his over the shoulder army field pouch that he used as a book bag. "Sure," he said. "What can I do for you?"

"My older brother is a fund raiser for the Georgetown School of International Law," she said. "He needs me to go with him tonight to something at the Metropolitan Opera House." Ron listened. He was baffled. Did she need him to cover some kind of game or dance for her? She watched his confusion and took a breath and said, "Would you go with me?"

The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny was an Opera in English by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill. Ron had never been to an Opera before. As he got dressed he felt, for one of the first times that he could remember, like a pauper. His suit was a hand-me-down from George. It was too big on him. He shoes were scuffed and he owned no shoe polish. He searched for socks that were not threatening to produce holes from their next wearing. He needed a haircut. None of his ties seemed to match the suit.

He tried to avoid the mirror as he tied his default light green tie around his neck. At least it didn't completely clash with the brown suit and a white shirt always worked. He avoided looking down at his scuffed black shoes that shabbily projected like loaves of bread sticking out of his pockets. He told himself that it was not like this was his idea. He tried to get his hair to stay behind his ears, but the bulk of it only caused his ears to project out more and to his thinking completed his image as Howdy Doody getting ready for church.

The directions to Grace Scarpelli house were easy enough. She lived in Maplewood. It was a huge brick place that must have had fifteen rooms. Grace met him at the door and said she really appreciated him doing this for her. She looked very different than the way that she did in her track suit at school. She wore a low cut blue evening dress and pearls around her neck and at her ears. Without thinking, he slid his arm around her waist as they walked to his car and she turned to him and smiled a freshly scrubbed and warm grin.

Located in Lincoln Center, The Opera House sparkled like a jewel in the early spring evening. Water gushed up in elegant torrents from a round fountain that was set in the middle of an immaculate square. The glass of the Opera House behind the fountain and the soft lights caught caused the water to also appear as if it were a flowing of jewels that was being puddled at the feet of some thirsty, other worldly creature. Ron felt like a dung beetle as he crossed the square. Harrison Scarpelli and the six contributors to the University's School of International Law seemed to arrive in the limo as perfectly timed as if it had been arranged by some punctual concierge. Stupidly Ron tried to polish the tops of his shoes on the backs of his calves as they stood waiting.

The entourage met Grace and Ron like a wave of fur and diamonds. Harrison kissed his sister and shook Ron's hand. Ron was relieved that he had at least remembered to clean his fingernails. Grace seemed relaxed and oblivious to his fidgeting discomfort as they all made their way up low flat stairs that to their table for ten on the Vilar Grand Tier. They were seated in front of an incredibly large painting by Marc Chagall. Ron wondered if they would have time for dinner before

the thing started. He turned to Grace and whispered, "Do you think that we'll be late if we eat?"

She moved her mouth to his ear and whispered back. "They time the meal to the Opera."

Ron felt like a blackhead. Harrison began the introductions, "This is my sister Grace Scarpelli and her date Ron Tuck. With a slow sweep of his arm he said, Mrs. Witherspoon and her cousin Mrs. Ravel." The two ladies nodded and smiled. "Mr. and Mrs. Sithe." Mrs. Sithe smiled but Mr. Sithe seemed to ignore the introduction and was moving his head above theirs as if searching for a waiter. He magically appeared at his side dressed in a white serving jacket and carrying a leather bound wine list. "And now, Mrs. Oglethorpe"

"Everyone please call me Bunny," said the large silver streaked woman with a diamond clutch bag that she laid casually on the table. Ron glanced at it and wondered how much it would bring in at a pawn shop.

"Last and most certainly not least are two of the University's oldest and dearest friends, Mrs. Singletary and her mother, Mrs. Gregory Winterhintz. There were two waiters dressed in white jackets, and they moved around the table taking dinner orders. Other waiters served dinner rolls, using silver tongs and placing one roll on each person's side dish. Small pats of butter were also placed next to the rolls and then salad dishes with spring greens were given to each person. Ron and Grace each ordered the prime rib entrée.

The early talk was about the weather and what a mild winter it had been. Ron was quiet and tried to listen attentively and smile. Grace was making smooth conversation and Ron noticed that she seemed as at home in this setting as she did in the gym.

Harrison Scarpelli was leading the conversation and warming the table with the confident expertise of a professional who knew how to put everyone at ease, and at the same time make everything seem completely casual. Ron watched him with admiration. He was wearing a gray suit with a light pinstripe and a darker gray tie that was tied in a perfect Windsor knot. His dress shirt sported square silver cuff links that projected at his wrists in perfect length. His hair was razor cut and seemed also perfectly in place. Ron wondered if a man like this ever had feelings that were similar to his. He doubted it. The man was at least twenty years younger than any of the others with the exception of Ron and Grace and it seemed to not matter at all to him or to them.

Finally someone asked, "Where is your family from, Ron?"

In the past, he had always made a point of saying that they were all from Newark, but this time he felt himself saying, "Glen Ridge."

"Oh yes," said Mrs. Gregory Winterhintz. "I have friends from Glen Ridge. It's very small isn't it?"

"Yes," said Ron. "I think that adds to its charm actually."

"Well, of course it does," said Bunny Oglethorpe.

Then there was a soft chiming of bells and a flickering of lights. It seemed to come on cue, just as they were finishing their salads.

The interior of the Opera house seemed to stretch up into the sky where a large, round, lighted globe of a chandelier looked down on the proceedings like a friendly sun. They were led to their seats, which were located in the President's box at the center of the Golden Horseshoe. As they sat, Ron noticed that there was more than ample room for their legs. In small pockets in front of each seat were opera glasses. Grace showed him how to open them. The lights dimmed and the opera began.

Ron was immediately struck by the richness of costume and the way that his eyes could not leave the stage. The Opera was one of the few that was in English, but he still could not really make out the words. The singers were incredible and the orchestra was impeccable. Sitting back, he wondered if he could have had this life if he had made different choices. A voice in his head told him that he would not have been able to appreciate it if he had not made the choices that he had made. The story was easy to follow. Criminals set up this city based on lust and greed and invite others who want to partake in these pleasures to join them. Ron listened to the voice of Jenny Smith, enraptured by the angelic quality that the whore had as she sang about whiskey and pretty boys. As their fortunes rose and fell Ron realized that he had forgotten all about his dinner. At the conclusion of the first act, as the characters waited for an approaching storm that threatened to destroy the city, the house light came up and Ron realized that he was very hungry.

Again, Ron was dazzled by the soft lights on gold and the glittering glass that was everywhere as they moved. It was a very short walk back to their table, but he kept waiting for Julian T. Willy to pop out from behind a white marble column and explain to Ron that the service entrance was in the rear.

They sat at their table and simultaneously waiters lifted stainless steel covers from off of their plates and there was their dinner, hot, perfectly timed to be eaten right now. It surprised Ron that his prime rib was quite ordinary. He had expected something of a heavenly quality that matched the surroundings.

Bunny Oglethorpe was explaining that her niece was going to boarding school in France and that she had gone “hither and yon” searching for the proper attire that was required to fill the girl’s trunk.

“Isn’t it ridiculous that they have lists of what is required?” said Mrs. Singletary. “They treat you as if you are going to send the girl away with plaid shirts and blue jeans.”

Mrs. Winterhintz turned to Ron. “You are in education, aren’t you Ron?”

“Yes, I’m a teacher at a small Catholic school in Newark.”

“Do they enforce a rigid dress code as well?” said Mrs. Oglethorpe.

Ron finished chewing and swallowed. “Our girls wear uniforms.”

“I do expect that would be best for them wouldn’t it?”

“I hadn’t thought about it,” said Ron.

Mrs. Oglethorpe said, “Well, someone has to teach them as well, I suppose.”

“We try our best,” said Grace, coming to his rescue.

Ron had the distinct impression after that that these people, far from being admirable, were cartoon characters. He began picturing Mrs. Oglethorpe is large floppy pink ears, and when he looked at Mrs. Singletary and Winterhintz the Bob Dylan line “Jewels and binoculars hang from the head of the mule” repeated in his head. He began to wonder if she brayed when she had orgasms.

Harrison Scarpelli said, “I would like to recommend that each of us have the chocolate sulfate for dessert. It really is quite good.”

“I’m all for chocolate,” said Mrs. Sithe.

Mr. Sithe looked at his watch. Finally he said, “They do have this well-organized.”

It was his only comment of the evening.

Back in their seats Act 2 began. Again Ron found his eyes drawn to the stage, and again the voices of the singers so astounded him that he wondered why he had never heard opera before. He realized that it just would not sound the same on a record. Then he was struck by the idea that his students needed to actually see one of the plays that they were doing. They didn’t sound the same on the recordings as they would appear in a theater.

In the second scene, a man ate himself to death and he was lauded as a man without fear. Ron wondered if the people in the theater found the message about excess to be quaint. He began to watch their faces with his opera glasses. They looked universally glum and bored. He wondered if this was not a very good performance or if that was their default posture.

As was expected, one of the characters, Jimmy, was in love with the whore Jenny. He sang of his love for her while men waited on line to pay to fuck her. At a boxing match, one man beats another to death. Ron wondered if these people would enjoy the show more if someone was actually beaten to death. The answer came back to him like the thud of a fist. No, they did not like things to be real. They preferred them bloodless and appreciated from a distance with a good view and opera glasses.

As the second act ended, Jim is arrested for not being able to pay his bar bill. He appeals to Jenny for help and she turns him down in a song called "Make your own bed." More and more, Jenny reminded Ron of Robin. Jim ends the second act chained to a lamppost singing a ballad that pleads for the sun not to rise for the day of his trial. He saw himself as the stupid sap who got in over his head and now had no way out.

As they forked into the waiting sulfates, chocolate scented whooshes of steam came out of them. The fork fills melted in their mouths and Ron watched as the diners smiled to each other and then secretly smacked their lips.

During the third act, Jimmy is convicted and sentenced to death for the crime of being broke. The line, "In the whole human race there is no greater criminal than a man without money," reverberated in Ron's head.

Ron turned his glasses on the crowd as they watched. It was the one line that drew smiling nods from the men. Ron was surprised that they had actually been listening closely enough to make it out. He found himself smiling when Jenny testified against Jimmy.

The opera ended, quite simply with Jimmy being hanged. Then there was a postscript about how the city finally tore itself to pieces because of its greed and corruption. Ron thought that was gratuitous.

As the crowd filed out that sat at their table and had coffee. These people would never be caught leaving with the herd. Ron remembered the line, "all that glitters is not gold" but it sure was here.

In his car, Grace took his hand and said, "Thank you so much for doing this. You were fabulous."

"Did you like those people?" said Ron.

"Oh god no, but that table gave Harrison about \$50,000 tonight."

"Why did he want you there?"

"There was a cancellation and it is not considered good form to have an empty seat at the table." said Grace.

Ron wondered if that was why no one had bothered to say good night to them. After all, they were just props.

He kissed Grace good night and she pressed herself to him. Ron did not harden but knew that he would if she worked at it hard enough. Was it access to this kind of life that we wanted for his students and for himself? He didn't want it but some of them would, and they should have the right to choose.

As Ron drove home thinking about the evening that had passed, Robin sat curled in her reading chair with a pad on her lap. It was to be her last night in this apartment that had taught her how to be alone and she wanted closure. She had not lived with anyone except for Ron, and the assorted people that he had run in and out of their lives, for eight years.

"Dear Ron," she looked at the page crumpled it and threw it away and began again. "Ron, you wanted to know why I wouldn't marry you and I did not want the argument of trying to explain it to you, but it stays on my mind and I want to be free of it. So, here goes. I don't trust you. I don't believe that you would have ever been faithful to me. I do believe that there is a good chance that you will become an addict. I never really cared about your teaching or the joy that it gave you and that just showed me that I really was not in love with you anymore. I don't think that you are a bad person, but I do believe that you are lost and damaged and will never be whole. I believe that you will spend the rest of your life in New Jersey, and that is not what I wanted. It never used to be what you wanted either. I knew that after you asked me to marry you that we could never be friends, but the idea of being your wife made me cringe. I know that you think that you love me, but what you loved isn't there for you anymore. I tried every way that I knew to tell you that, but as usual you would not listen."

Robin reread the page. It made her smile that she didn't feel anything. She started to put it into an envelope and then a thought struck her. Why should she? She crumpled the page and through it into the waste basket next to the blank page that showed at the top, "Dear Ron."