

A foggy night scene with a bridge and a large sculpture. The scene is dimly lit with warm, yellowish lights from the bridge. In the foreground, the silhouettes of a man and a child are walking away from the viewer, holding hands. The man is wearing a dark jacket and the child is wearing a dark shirt and pants. The background shows the bridge structure and a large, dark sculpture of a face or head, partially obscured by the fog.

**THEODORE
WEEESNER**

**THE
TRUE
DETECTIVE**

**“ . . . A RARE ACHIEVEMENT, A WISE BOOK . . .
THAT IT’S ALSO A PAGE-TURNER IS A MARVEL.”**

—Stewart O’Nan, acclaimed author of *Emily Alone* and *Last Night at the Lobster*

Honor and Praise for the True Detective:

“A harrowing psychological study of the effects of kidnapping and child molestation on the victim, the abductor, their families, and the investigating detective.”

—American Library Association, (ALA) 1987 Notable Book List

“The True Detective is tough-minded, but subtly done. The language, the details, the progress of the POV sections—everything serves Weesner’s total effect brilliantly. And while it deals with a sensational, even loaded subject, ultimately I’d say the novel is that rare achievement, a wise book and maybe the saddest book I’ve read. That it’s also a page-turner is a marvel.”

—Stewart O’Nan, acclaimed author of *Emily Alone* and *Last Night at the Lobster*

“The True Detective is a wrenching novel to read. It is a crime novel that more than any other I have read that takes in the whole situation of the crime. There are no obvious villains here, or easy answers. This is not a genre novel. It belongs on the literature shelf.”

—David Guy, *USA Today*

“Weesner seems to have a pipeline into the minds of young people when they are confused and in trouble . . .” (The True Detective is) *“. . . a compulsively readable thriller that is to the nuclear family what Hiroshima was to the nuclear bomb, and the best account yet of its detonation.”*

—Joseph Coates, *Chicago Tribune*

*“Theodore Weesner, author of the much praised *The Car Thief* uses his moving story of the abduction, rape and murder of a 12-year-old boy to raise the kind of moral questions that no caring person could ignore today.”*

—Marilyn Stasio, *Fort Worth Morning Star Telegraph*

Praise for *The Car Thief*:

“When it first appeared in 1972, The Car Thief took its place as one of the great coming of age novels of the twentieth century. Forty-five years later, it brings back a lost moment in America’s past, the brash young auto industry on an exhilarating joyride, Michigan’s Motor Cities roaring with life. Tom Weesner’s seminal novel demands a second look for its marvelously rendered young protagonist, the unforgettable Alex Housman; for its courage and wisdom and great good heart.”

—Jennifer Haigh, New York Times Bestselling Author of: *Broken Towers, Faith, Mrs. Kimble and The Conditions*

“A remarkable, gripping first novel.”

—Joyce Carol Oates

“The Car Thief is a poignant and beautifully written novel, so true and so excruciatingly painful that one can’t read it without feeling the knife’s cruel blade in the heart.”

—Margaret Manning, *The Boston Globe*

*“Weesner lays out a subtle and complex case study of juvenile delinquency that wrenches the heart. The novel reminds me strongly of the poignant aimlessness of Truffaut’s *The 400 Blows*. Beneath its quiet surface, *The Car Thief*—like its protagonist—possesses churning emotions that push up through the prose for resolution. Weesner is definitely a man to watch—and read.”*

—S. K. Oberbeck, *Newsweek*

*“What *The Car Thief* is really concerned with emerges between its realistic lines—slowly, delicately—with consummate art. Perhaps Mr. Weesner himself put it best: ‘In my work, I guess I wish for nothing so much as to get close enough to things to feel their heart and warmth and pain, and in that way appreciate them a little more.’ Judging from this book, his wish has been fulfilled . . . and then some.”*

—Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, *The New York Times*

“A simply marvelous novel. Alex emerges from it as a kind of blue-collar Holden Caulfield.”

—Kansas City Star

Honor and Praise for *Winning the City*:

“Winning the City is a fine novel, a crisply written story about a young boy’s struggle to define himself.”

—James Carroll, *Ploughshares*

“A courageous author . . . No one better has a handle on heartbreak— he reminds me of a latter-day Dreiser who writes better, stylistically . . . What is so special about Weesner is the emotional precision.”

—Joseph Coates, *Chicago Tribune*

“. . . a knockout! . . . Dale’s struggles to win in a world whose odds are stacked against outsiders . . . leads to a heartbreaking kind of disillusionment and courageous maturity.”

—Dan Wakefield, *Boston Globe*

“Winning the City tells of a young athlete ‘nearly driven out of mind with all he knew,’ but M Weesner’s own mind is superbly clear on every page. He is an extraordinary writer.”

—Richard Yates, *New York Times* Bestselling Author of *Revolutionary Road*

THE TRUE DETECTIVE

by
Theodore Weesner

ASTOR
+ BLUE
EDITIONS

This is a work of fiction. All characters and events portrayed in this novel are either fictitious or are used fictitiously. Places are named, but only to suggest reality. None of the persons who appear in these pages is intended to represent anyone, living or dead.

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New Introduction:

THE SEXUAL REVOLUTION WENT VIRAL IN THE 70s, LEAVING countless sexual simpletons in its wake. Due to internet porn, the trend has yet to burn off in the new century and anyone's guess is as good as mine in estimating the degree of blindered sexual simplicity that has flowed over all like a shallow flood, dampening the soles of every pair of shoes.

The True Detective is an account of several casualties in the revolution, a sexually obsessed twenty-one-year-old college student, a bewildered senior investigator trying to understand, and an innocent twelve-year-old boy who wanders directly into the jaws of the new pathology. In a seaside town in New England a sudden 'incident' startles the town in its headlong rush into the restoration of things new on old footings and foundations. Explicit pervasive sex, let out of the closet, is in the process of changing everything everywhere for everyone.

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AS A NOVELIST I found myself exposed to the material of this novel on a visit to Detroit with my twelve-year-old son to watch the University of New Hampshire hockey team compete in the NCAA playoffs. Alas, something was immediately terribly wrong throughout Detroit and nearby Oakland County. The news was blasting from newspaper headlines and TV screens. Four children, two boys and two girls, ages twelve, thirteen, eleven, and ten had in recent weeks been abducted from the streets, harbored for several days each, sexually violated, and put to death, their bodies left along roadsides to be discovered by passersby. The threat in the air was so palpable I did not allow my son out of my view for our three days of watching tournament hockey games, having lunch at Elias B. Boy, driving north to Flint in a rental car to show my son where I had grown up, how far I had walked to school, and to give him his first driving lesson in the cemetery where my father lay buried under a simple marker.

Returning home to New Hampshire, unable to dislodge from my mind what was one of the most charged atmospheres I had ever known, I conferred with my editor in New York and entered into a contract for the writing of a non-fiction account of the Oakland County child killings. Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* had been one of the most compelling reading experiences I had known and my mission as a fiction writer was to bring similar qualities of artful prose to the powerful drama I had seen unfolding along the Woodward Corridor into Oakland County.

Moving to Rochester, Michigan with my wife and three children, I gained permission to tag along with investigators from a Special State Police Task Force committed to solving the serial crimes. While interviewing detectives as well as family members, I mapped out and visited all locations, reconstructing as accurately as possible—in a loose leaf notebook—every moment and detail having to do with the crime spree. Like the State Police detectives, my writing and investigating—my seeking to understand—was meant to culminate in the apprehension, conviction, and punishment of the killer.

Alas, no killer was apprehended and my personal *In Cold Blood* was not meant to be. With hundreds of pages of prose, returning to New Hampshire, I felt informed enough in my analysis of a new sexual pathology having come into existence (one confirmed by Ted Bundy, by the way, on the eve of his execution in Florida), that I used one of the family profiles, together with my imagination, to write

novel dedicated to a single child and a single detective. I called the novel *The True Detective* and saw it published successfully by Summit Books in 1987 and by Avon in 1988 as a mass-market paperback. Given the unfulfilled literary aspirations I brought to the task, always wanting to see the book appear in a quality literary paperback, I'm pleased to see it published here as an ebook, and hope that readers will appreciate not only its literary but its true-crime characteristics.

Theodore Weesner

Portsmouth, New Hampshire, 2012

Who haunt every night the hallways of my mind

Prologue

Portsmouth, New Hampshire, 1981

MURDER STOPPING AT A SMALL TOWN MAY HAVE THE EFFECT of a nail dropped into the mechanism of town life. In large cities, by contrast, any number of murders may be processed and left behind daily and only a glut creates a stir. A town or small city, even as it has no choice but to continue on its way, is likely to pause. It will look within, may gaze even harder and longer if the crime seems to have stepped down from a bus coming in from Boston or New York, L.A. or Atlanta. Questions will be asked. Why here? Did we do something? Is this the start of something new?

A new bridge bypassing Portsmouth offers a view that could be from a plane. Below, where the river opens to the Atlantic, are the town's older bridges, the Route 1 Bypass and the Memorial Bridge. There, too, are its white and blue and cream-colored pleasure boats in stalls, its Naval Shipyard workshops painted battleship gray, and the immediate merging of sky, river mouth, and ocean. Close up the shore are the town's brick buildings and narrow streets, pressed by rows of wooden houses and oak tree tops, held throughout by salt water washing into the town's coves and harbors, creeks and bays. Directly under the bridge a depth of water pours one way or another in its tidal slide, and as always a lobster boat is sputtering by, leaving a thin white wake in the swollen green surface, drawing along a gull or two like toys on a string.

The antique seaport of thirty-odd thousand is on the northern border of New Hampshire's momentary coastline, and the wide river coming and going is the Piscataqua. The new bridge turning through the sky is spliced into Interstate 95, three lanes going each way, leaving the ground like a long line drive, curving east in its trajectory north, cresting above the water at 165 feet—a dozen feet less at high tide—and returning to earth in another state. Southbound (*Live Free or Die/Bienvenue Au/New Hampshire*) and northbound (*Welcome to Maine/Vacation Land*), the green superstructure is intended to carry civilization into New England's high corner well into the coming century.

Sea sounds and smells are here in all seasons. Over land and water gulls and sea ducks complain and argue, buoys and ships' bells clang and hammer, and the clam flats and rock formations with their catch basins and green beards—unlike the blond beaches on the nearby ocean proper—perk and hiss and send off their foul breath at low tide. There are old docks and piers and seawalls around town, too, covered with generations of minuscule barnacles and crustaceans, which at a distance are not dissimilar from other colonies up on shore. There is life underwater, too, where seaweed-black lobsters the size of baseball gloves thumb-strut throughout the dark mystery as if they have seen it all as if there is nothing new under the sun.

On land, where the town is in the process of becoming a small city, wood-framed houses along the narrow old streets are being salvaged and painted yet again, and the occasional red brick mill or shoe factory is being converted to offices, apartments, boutiques, cafés. It is a town being rediscovered and repopulated, and along its old waterfront streets and in its wooden-floored mom-and-pop grocery stores, the term *mixed blessing* has found new currency. But so, elsewhere in town, have the terms *paradise*, and *pride*, and not so rarely, *San Francisco of the East*.

When the local lieutenant of detectives dresses up it is in a necktie and possibly a V-neck sweater under a wool shirt jacket from Kittery Trading Post; not dressing up, he dispenses with the necktie. An early riser, he often takes a walk in his town on Saturday morning, while his wife Beatrice sleeps in. He walks in town, or about the waterfront, or through a neighborhood. He may walk through one of the

old downtown cemeteries and try to perceive something of life in a reading of markers. Or he may drive to one of the nearby beaches, to stroll and see what has washed up overnight. He will pick up broken glass if he sees it, if its edges have not been washed smooth, and deposit it in a trash barrel. When he returns to his car. And he may stand for a time near the seawall at Wallis Sands and watch gulls and squads of sandpipers work the beach within its roar and mist, as waves roll in and break and leave behind a glistening effervescence of table scraps.

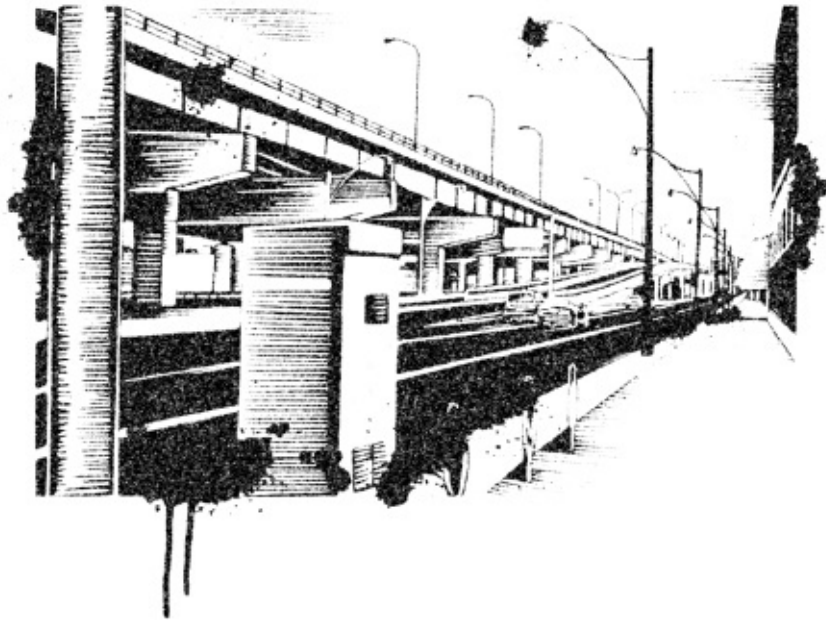
What he enjoys above all is to watch the far-off smudges of boats to see if they are advancing, little time, on the horizon. A child's pastime, he often thinks. And he often thinks, too, that it is one of the pastimes to which he would introduce children, if he had children, even as this thought has reminded him lately of an account by a lawyer acquaintance whose path he is forever crossing at the courthouse or in the police station. More than once, in elevator and marble lobby, the man has told him of walking with his son and daughter on the beach at Ogunquit, passing through the grassy dunes and happening upon two naked men lying together—well, more than lying together, the man has said, once a man, it seemed, but then two—just as the sun was coming up and he was walking with his son and daughter.

Gilbert Dulac is fifty-two years old and twenty-six years a policeman, an overweight, oversized immigrant of French Canadian birth—he carries 260 pounds on a frame six feet four inches tall—and he has regarded the town as his for a dozen years or more. The feeling is a consequence, he knows, of being a policeman, of being a detective and the lieutenant of detectives, and of the town being small enough to understand, but also of being an immigrant, even if it was only to shift down, some thirty years ago, from Quebec, more as a neighbor marrying in than as a foreigner putting down roots. Like other immigrants, as immigrants know if others do not—as they believe their seriousness to be the country's secret weapon—he is more aware of the ideals of his adopted land and life than are the natives, and it is this added charge which gives him satisfaction in his self-appointed role, one he exercises quietly, as town father in an American town.

Everyone should be so lucky, he reminds himself ever more often as time slips along and his horizons seem to diminish at a quicker rate. Children would have been the greater good luck, he has always thought; that he has none is his life's only deep-seated regret. Children, just one or two, would have provided all that he and Beatrice might ever need or want to move on into the shadows ahead and into the darkness. He'd have them out this morning, in fact; he'd have chased them out of bed whatever their ages and taken them for a stroll on the beach, just as he always went with his own father on Saturdays when he was a boy and his father was free from work, when they'd take their sleek green Hudson Hornet down to the garage and hang out with the other men and boys and speak of cars and motors, of geese and Atlantic salmon, of Rocket Richard, of Lindsay and Howe.

It was in 1981 then that an incident happened to startle the town in its headlong rush into restoration, new brick walkways, and new taxes. On a Saturday evening in February, a twelve-year-old boy walking home close to downtown disappeared, leaving only traces of circumstantial evidence. Like a creature lifting out of the water, the incident sent a chill through the area, stole a beat in the town's preoccupied preening upon its new wardrobe; all the world paused, if it knew it or not.

PART ONE



MAGAZINE PHOTOGRAPHS

CHAPTER 1

HERE IS ERIC WELLS, ON VALENTINE'S DAY, LYING ON THE living room floor, giving love a chance. Chin in hand, he keeps catching himself looking all the way through the TV screen where otherwise on buzz saw feet, the Roadrunner is zipping everywhere. The old screen's black-and-white images don't quite matter now. Red colors keep coming up there. Blushes of valentine red. He is twelve years old and the colors are raising a warmth in him.

The card was in his desk at school yesterday. At the time he could only sneak a glance, but as he carried it home after school, trying to ignore that it was in his pants pocket, bending with his leg, the red colors kept stirring in him. Taking it into his bedroom, he closed the door. He looked at it and looked at it. If valentines were such mush, he wondered, why did it feel so good?

He gives the Roadrunner another try, until the feeling is in him again. He thinks, yuck. Then he thinks, this could be love, and catches himself tittering all the more as he tries and tries not to guess who could have put the dumb thing in his desk.

From the kitchen, close by, his mother says, "Eric, at least come have some toast."

Toying with a Matchbox car, he doesn't say anything. Always before he would have answered. The sensation is in him and he doesn't answer in the first moment and then not at all. Nor does he feel anything like hunger. Their apartment is small, and his mother is hardly a dozen feet away. How could a Navy Seal, he wonders—he's been dreaming for months of someday joining the U.S. Navy Seals—feel like this about a valentine?

MATTHEW, LYING IN bed with his eyes closed, is not asleep. There are two roll-away beds in the partitioned end of the apartment he shares with his little brother, but the winter sun seems this morning to heat only his own. Matthew is fifteen. His mood is terrible. The smell of chili cooking over there angers him and vaguely he wishes he were anywhere but where he is.

He gives a thought to a girl in school, a black girl of all things, who spoke to him yesterday, who seemed often lately to flirt with him. To another girl, over something in algebra, she said, "Let's ask Matt Wells. He always has his work done."

She was teasing; he never had his work done anymore. But there was her smile and there, too, were several tiny gold rings on the fingers of one hand and a gold earring in her ear. The combination suddenly struck him: gold and chocolate.

But lying in bed now within the aroma of chili, his mood is so awful he is close to tears. When he knows his mother has opened the door, he keeps his eyes closed and lets his anger thrive on her presence.

"Matt, don't you think it's time you got up?"

He holds.

"Matt," she says.

Still he holds.

“Matt!” she says.

“*What?*” he says.

“I know you heard what I said.”

He doesn't respond. He stops himself from shouting, or from collapsing within.

“Matt, you've got to stop being so hard on everybody,” his mother says. “We can't live like this.”

GUIDING ONE OF his paint-worn Matchbox cars, Eric gives an uncertain ride to a pair of plastic soldiers. Dumping the pair on the other side of a gorge, he drives back to pick up two more. He changes his mind, though, and glances over where the Roadrunner is still zipping around. That bird is so dumb, he thinks. Turning onto his back, he places his hands under his head and looks into the universe where there used to be but a ceiling.

“Eric, you don't have a fever, do you?” his mother says.

“Nope.”

“Are you sure?”

He doesn't respond.

“I wish you'd eat something,” she says, although on a pause her wish disappears with her back in the kitchen.

Returning from his journey, Eric looks once more at the television screen. He and the nineteen-inch black-and-white set are the same age, and too often in her nostalgic moments his mother has told him that when she brought him home from the hospital they spent hours together watching everything that appeared on the tube. Except when he was nursing, she always adds, which was practically all the time. Maybe a year ago, when he was old enough to tell her how icky it made him feel when she talked like that, she told him that someday he'd enjoy recalling such things as how he put on his first pound.

Well, here it is, he thinks. This is it. Sitting up, but not by choice, and in the grip of something serene, he touches his chin to a bridge between his knees. His insides continue on their spinning ride into the heavens. He'd have to admit—these things don't feel bad, these valentines and thoughts. They feel good right there at the tip of his spine, in the center of all that he never tells.

AS THE FREEDOM of Saturday morning is pleasantly under way, Claire is cooking a pot of chili, on consignment from the Legion Hall where she works weekends as a waitress. The weather outside is unusually warm—a February thaw—and she cannot resist humming a little as she guides a wooden spoon through the deep mix. She enjoys cooking. All her life she has enjoyed Saturday morning. They are her favorite hours of the week, the only time she hums.

Otherwise she is a packer at Boothbay Fisheries. Growing up in rural Maine, leaving school in the ninth grade, Claire has worked at the fishery eight years now, since her husband left—his whereabouts are unknown—and since she moved here with her two sons. If Claire is worrying over anything this unusually pleasant morning, it is her oldest son, Matt. He seems so unhappy anymore, seems to be going backward instead of forward. If only she could tell him something helpful. If only she could get him to stop being so mean to his little brother. And to himself, she thinks. She wonders if it's too late to dish out a good spanking. Would it do any good? Would it make things worse?

~~WHO WOULD BELIEVE it, Eric thinks, as he finds himself gazing yet again into the mystery overheard.~~ He's never gone cuckoo like this before. His dreams have always been to build things. He'd use his vehicles to bulldoze roadways and airstrips; he'd throw pontoons over streams or bridge them with Popsicle sticks, and use rope and winch to save whatever trucks and troops he happened to allow slip in their passage from one side to the other. *Combat Naval Engineers* was one of the neatest names he'd ever heard. So was *Airborne Rangers*. *Frogmen*. *Special Forces*. The names made his scalp sing, made his loins tingle, called up in him an urge to go out and build a fort or climb a tree. Who would believe something like this might so easily get in the way? Girls? Valentines?

Who would believe that on a Saturday morning, of all things, he wants to be in school? Wow, he thinks. He has to be going crazy.

VANESSA DINEEN IS the black girl's name. Thinking of her, Matt is taken with a desire to gaze at women in his hidden magazines. He is attracted at once to the escape the color photographs offer, the intersecting pink valentines—the glistening cuts of veal and pork—at the same time that he has no wish to take on the guilt he always feels afterwards.

He knows he's going to do it, though. It's always like this. He's too much in its grip already to turn back, unless someone walks in.

Someone does—just as his motor is revving up.

Lying on his side, the sheet tented by his shoulder, he has explored little more than a page or two when Eric blasts into the room. “*What're you doing?*” Matt snaps at him, letting the sheet collapse.

“Nothing—getting something—what do you care?”

Leaving, quickly, Eric leaves the door standing open. Matt could scream at him but doesn't. He could tear after him and smash him in the face, but he doesn't. Again, he could cry, but he doesn't do that either. Putting the magazine back under his mattress, he lies there. He stares at something just a few inches before his eyes. His strength has left him; the feeling to cry nearly has him again, and his eyes blur as a spinning-away urge to exist no more passes through his mind.

In the distance a gull shrieks and calls up in Claire a feeling of spring. Soon again she is purring to the music of no known origin, guiding the wooden spoon. Not her mother, but her father used to hum like this. In their farmhouse near Lewiston, sitting around in cold weather, doing whatever repairing and tinkering and tying and polishing there was to do, he often hummed. He winked. As the youngest, she received more of the winks. He was old—her parents were old enough to be grandparents when she was born—and their interest in her always seemed as fresh as day-old bread. Both were gone now, and here she was living like this, a divorced mother, living in an apartment.

She nips a taste of chili. It should be satisfying, she thinks, to just be home like this on a Saturday morning, preparing food. It is—almost. Except for what seems to be wrong. She'll have to come up with something, she thinks.

What would a father do? Would a father rail at Matthew? Deny him privileges? What privileges does he have in the first place?

WHEN HE CLOSES his eyes—Eric has just learned—the outer space, valentine sensation will come up in him. Awesome, he thinks, eyes closed to the ceiling, a door going up on his heart, all his organs playing him this serenade they have never played before.

Merely to respond the pleasure, he looks back at how it started. There is the white envelope with his name. Inside is the red card. And there, as the card is opened, is the message, flying on its arrow directly into his chest: *I have my eye on you! Won't you be my Valentine?*

In a felt-tip pen it is signed *Guess Who*.

He has guessed a little. He has guessed almost everyone, and no one. Mainly, in the flush of things he has settled on no one. Nor does the problem of loyalty go away as he lies staring at the ceiling. There are his comrades in battle, under mortar attack. Someone has to throw a bridge over a ravine and save lives. And there is his sweetheart back home, and she nearly has a name by now. How weird he thinks, that this new call is so much stronger than the other.

MATTHEW'S EYES REMAIN closed; the cooking smell continues to upset him. His other escape, after those under the bedsheet, is to think of his father. He likes to invent secret futures in which his father returns or in which he goes away to find him. Runs away. He can come up with dreams, almost any time, in which life appears new and possible again. He and his old man on the road. Tooling along in a car. Working construction. Running cable, like they do on TV.

He'd give anything, he thinks all at once, to be eighteen, to be on his own.

Maybe he'll take off. A couple years ago they heard that his father was working construction in New Orleans, and in his school's reference room he looked up the city in the atlas. He studied a patch of yellow on the map, which indicated the city's size; he envisioned his father there, deep within the map's color, working about the skeleton of a new building. What if he wrote to New Orleans? What if he took off and hitchhiked south?

Getting out of bed at last, Matthew stands in his underwear beside the chilled windowpane, looking down over the tops of parked cars. In recent days a new thought of his father has been in his mind. Standing with other boys in and around school, it has struck him how they are all making moves in their lives, and not for the day alone or for the semester, but for bigger things. Jobs. Cars. Money. They were getting driver's licenses, working part-time in the offices and shops where their fathers work. Girls. They were walking boldly with girls. They spoke of dates, of stopping at girls' houses.

His father was a journeyman electrician, Matt has thought, and would be one still. If he were here, he thinks; if his father were here, working construction like he did before, then he could say things to school himself. He could speak up in the company of boys, and of girls too, and in the company of teachers, for journeyman electricians, as everyone knew, made what was more important than anything else; they made good money.

CHAPTER 2

A DOZEN MILES INLAND, ALONG THE RIVER AND ACROSS THE Great Bay, a young man, Vernon Fischer, is waiting for a telephone call. Twenty-one, a senior at the University of New Hampshire, Vernon is sitting at a picnic table in a pond-side cabin two miles west of Durham, where the university is located. He is sitting over an empty coffee mug, over pencils, school papers, books, glancing over the surface, but really over his life, and letting time slide by.

He knows his friend isn't going to call. At the same time he has an ear perked for the telephone to ring. His thought is to take up the receiver before it rings a second time and awakens his housemate. He wants to at least have privacy, in case the words he has to hear, or speak, are difficult.

They will be difficult all right, he knows, just as he knows the telephone is not going to ring. Would he be able to speak at all? In these past days his capacity to talk has been getting even worse. All his life he has had difficulty facing such problems, and lately he has not been able to face them at all. His friend, he knows, is not going to call.

This is so hard to believe, he tells himself. This isn't him. He isn't sitting here like this, confused over such a thing. A friendship with a teenager at that, he thinks. It isn't anything really, and it is based on practically nothing—except, of course, that it was the first time he had ever let himself go in such a way.

Taking up a wooden pencil, he rolls it in his fingers. He glances at a textbook, a pad of paper. He could at least get some reading done while he waits, he thinks. At the same time, he knows he has no capacity to take in the demanding words and meaning in the book before him, called *Molecular Biology as Art and Science*. Each thin, silken page, he knows, presents a maze of complexity. A devoted student—if nothing else, he reminds himself—he has devoured many such books. In the best of times, though, he had to shut out the surrounding world, had to take on each phrase, each diagram, each illustration, and concept, had to fix it, look at it from another side, all the time urging himself to *see* and *think*, to *put things together*, to *succeed*, to *show them*, to *show every person he had ever known who had had no belief in him, who had avoided him* . . .

Stop it, he says to himself, as he thinks again of the fool he made of himself last night. He sees himself waiting at the door to Anthony's dormitory, acting as if he were not waiting to catch him with someone else. What an impossible scene. How could anyone act so badly?

Getting to his feet, Vernon walks over to look through the window above the kitchen sink. He knows the telephone, on the counter to his right, is within reach of his arm. He decides yet again, however, that it isn't going to ring. He knows the worst thing to do is to listen for it to ring. Please ring, he says to himself. Let me have one more chance. Please let me have one more chance.

He looks through the window. He wonders for the moment who he is, and how he has come to be where he is today. The hurt he feels is so strange, he thinks. How could it be this way? Was it because he had been bottled up all his life?

He looks again through the glass, although the position of his head has not changed. From this angle the pond spreading out below has the shape of a dollar sign. Ice covers the pond. A single curving piece, he sees. It fits perfectly. There have been so many secrets in his life, he thinks. Secret games and stories. They lasted all day, sometimes all summer or all year. Some lasted still. In fact, anything that had ever been important to him had been a secret. Secret hopes. Wishes. A wish that someone might speak to him in school, take a seat next to him. Appear on the sidewalk if he turned a certain

corner. Telephone on Saturday afternoon. Now he has this secret wish in him that the telephone will ring and that it will be his friend, even as he knows this wish will go the way of all his previous secret wishes.

The air near the window feels different. The gray surface of the pond looks soft under the sun, like lukewarm water, and tells of a thaw coming in. So many years in New Hampshire, he thinks. Ten winters. Would he have been different in a different location? Would he have talked more, become more of a person somewhere else? He might have his red cheeks and look younger than he is, but who knows what he might have been like if they had gone somewhere else? What if they had gone to a large city, with a giant-sized high school, instead of a small town. Would there have been a place for him? Would he have come out of himself?

You're okay, he tells himself. You're going to be fine. This will pass. It will go on its way. Other friends will come along. It would be a mistake to make too much of a small thing like this at a certain time in your life.

He hears something. Leaning over the sink to the window, he directs an ear, to listen. He hears nothing then. He listens to nothing. He hears only the country sounds. They are far off. Still waters run deep, people have said to him. The idea has made him almost sick with rage. But he has never said so. Like everything else, he has turned the idea back into himself.

Is it a truck on the highway? The oil trucks sing like that. Maybe it's an airplane. The cabin is two or three hundred yards from Route 125, a two-lane highway, and nearly a mile, by winding dirt road from a paved secondary road. It's a quiet pocket. Too quiet, Vernon thinks. Maybe it's part of the problem. Next year, if all goes well, he should be in Boston. He'll find himself there, he thinks. Even if he is lost here, he will find himself next year in Boston. That has to be his beacon.

Then, at once, the thought of being anywhere else is irreconcilable. It isn't possible to be anywhere else.

The airplanes up there fly between Boston and Montreal. It's what was said in Laconia. He wasn't sure if anyone knew where the planes were really going. They were so high their vapor trails reflecting sunlight beyond the horizon, were more visible on the ground than the planes themselves. Unless they reflected the sun. Anthony will be in those planes, and he will see him from the ground. In his small town, he thinks. He will be a prisoner in his small town all the rest of his life and will feel this way every time he looks at the sky.

Again, he thinks he hears something. He returns to the picnic table. There is movement in one of the rooms. Maybe it's just someone turning over in bed. God, if they knew what he'd been doing lately.

He does hear movement now; it is clear. He directs his hearing toward the closed doors. The door opens again, he hears nothing. He listens still, but hears nothing. Maybe he was listening too closely, he thinks, hearing something when nothing was there?

The stringy-haired, slumped-shoulder kid *was* there, he thinks. Could he be blamed for that? Dear God, to think that he attempted to be polite, to introduce himself, even to shake hands. What a fool he made of himself. He sees the boy again. His shoulder-length blond hair. His raincoat about a foot too short. Hunched there in the dark. A beak nose. He wonders if Anthony joked about him to the other boy.

Again he hears something. Someone is up, moving around. A dresser drawer opens and closes. This is so impossible, he thinks, looking down at the table again as he hears a bedroom door open. What does Anthony does call? He hopes it's Duncan, the student from New Jersey who is the oldest of the four and who, like Vernon, took the room through a posting on the campus housing bulletin board. The other two, high school friends from Manchester who share the third bedroom, are never so friendly. Leon especially, a high school hockey player, is usually sullen, almost mean, and always quick-tempered. Vernon believes he does it on purpose—to pull a tab on a can of beer and turn on blaring radio music.

which always sends Vernon out to his car, on his way into town to the university library.

Vernon turns his face to his school papers, avoids looking as he hears the person walk to the bathroom. He hears water running; the toilet flushes.

Vernon takes up a pencil, to appear to be working. Nor does he look up when he hears the person pad into the kitchen. "Quiet Man, you're up?" a voice says.

Relief. It's Duncan; as always, there is something friendly in his manner. "Morning," Vernon says. "You hung over?" Duncan asks.

"No," Vernon says. It is more of Duncan being friendly; he knows Vernon would not be hung over.

"I'm still half in the bag," Duncan says.

Vernon smiles some. He is thinking how he has always been able to tell, when people teased him, if they liked him or not. It was another of his secrets. Duncan likes him. Calling him Quiet Man, as Leon often does, there is something in his voice. When Leon uses the name, it comes out differently. The same is true of Leon's roommate, Wayne, although Wayne usually lets Leon do the talking.

Duncan is fixing instant coffee. "I thought I heard you come in late," he says. "I mean even later than me."

"I was out," Vernon says. He would say more; he would explain something, but as usual he cannot.

"I bet it wasn't drinking that kept you out," Duncan says slyly.

"No," Vernon says, pleased that Duncan is teasing him. "Not drinking."

"Vernon, you got some little sweetie out there, don't you?"

Again, Vernon smiles. "No," he says, like a child.

"Me neither," Duncan says. "You want to go steady?"

They laugh; Vernon laughs as if for the first time in his life. His eyes fill.

Duncan sips coffee. "Vernon, listen," he says. "I've been meaning to ask you to help me with my calculus. I don't know why I need it for economics, but I do. I mean sometime when you have a chance. But soon."

"Sure," Vernon says.

"You'll help me?"

"Sure."

"Tomorrow?"

"Okay."

Sipping again, looking at him over his cup, Duncan says, "Man, are you okay?"

"Sure," Vernon manages to say.

Duncan keeps looking at him. "I mean you're always sort of weird," he says. "But lately, you really do seem weird."

"I'm fine," Vernon says.

Watching him still, Duncan nods. Carrying his cup then, he starts back in the direction of the bathroom. "Okay," he says. "Calculus tomorrow."

Vernon sits at the table. He'd like to have said more, as usual, but didn't. It could be so pleasant, he thinks. He could so enjoy someone being friendly with him. Taking the lead, though, because it was something he'd never been able to do. Did any of them have any idea how much he suffered by his reticence?

Getting up, believing he has heard a voice—it would have to be Leon or Wayne in the other bedroom—Vernon slips back to his own bedroom, to close himself in. He couldn't face those two right now, he thinks. Not today.

Sitting at his desk, next to the door, he hears them moving around in the kitchen and bathroom. A few times like these Leon always wore a pair of gray sweatpants that revealed the droop of his genital, which embarrassed and angered Vernon. Something about Leon always seemed to say, look, see what

have here—so Vernon sensed—which made him avoid looking at all costs.

~~This is awful, he says to himself, sitting in his room. What is so strange, he thinks, is that the one person who could lift him out of his depression on nothing more than a couple words is the one person who isn't about to.~~

He sits at his desk. In a moment, on a thought, he digs into the bottom of a drawer to remove an erotic magazine—in a manila folder—he has had in his possession since childhood. Called *Summertime Friends*, the magazine is something he had yet to show to his friend, and he is wondering now if it would have any effect on him, if it would excite him—two prepubescent boys engaged page after page, scene after scene, of sex play? Would it help now?

He glances through the magazine, scans its pages. It's been a long time, months, since he has last looked at his two young friends, but he knows the pages well and feels some comfort now in their presence. There were times in his life when the two boys seemed to be—they were—his only companions, and glancing over the pages, it seems less the two of them he is seeing now than himself, himself alone, perhaps studying the photographs, kissing them, tracing them, daring all sorts of things with them in the kind of escapes they allowed him to experience. Childhood.

The telephone in the kitchen rings. Vernon's heart stops; he doesn't move as he hears someone walk past his door.

The telephone rings a second time. Vernon holds.

He hears Duncan speaking. Hearing Duncan laugh, he knows the call isn't for him. It means he'll have to go ahead with the meeting. *If I don't call . . .*

Duncan would be getting a call from his father in New Jersey. This seemed to happen every weekend, when they caught up on how all the sports teams in the East had fared since they had talked last. Was that how fathers and sons talked? Was it a secret code?

Vernon closes the magazine cover and the manila folder. Checking his watch, coming around the desk, exhaling, he decides he might as well go on his way, go ahead and get it over with.

On his feet, he checks his pants pocket to be sure he has his keys. He leaves the secret magazine where it is on his desk. Does he hope it will be found? he wonders. Turning out his desk lamp, he leaves his bedroom, pulling the door nearly shut.

Crossing the kitchen—his coat is on a hook in the doorway—he raises a hand to say so long to Duncan, as does Duncan in turn, capping the phone and saying, “Later, Quiet Man. Calculating tomorrow.”

In an odd leap, as if through a blank space, Vernon is outside. Perhaps the momentary time lapse had to do with the weather, he thinks, for the air outside is immediately sunny and warm. The air is almost hopeful. He walks around the cabin to a row of cars in the sun, to unlock the door of the third car and last in line, a faded, silver gray 1975 Pontiac Sunbird.

CHAPTER 3

KATHLEEN MOREAU! ERIC THINKS. YES—YES, KATHLEEN Moreau! She is so small and shy. She sits on the edge of class and never in the middle. Just like someone else he knows, he thinks. And she has looked at him. Leaving the building, on sidewalk and stairway, across their busy room and in turns on the board, glances have slipped from her small dark eyes like folded notes. Gee, he thinks. They could end up getting married. Talk about going off the deep end.

A girl, he thinks. It's so strange that on the slightest attention from a girl he'd find himself sidetracked like this. A Navy Seal turning to mush, all at the hands of one of those puzzles with brains and long hair.

Her small ankles, though, and the shanks of her legs. There is her profile, too—around the side of her head which her glances seem to *click*—and the small bones of her shoulders like seashells within her blouses and sweaters.

Out of control. Kathleen Moreau.

He rolls over. Well, it could be somebody else, he is telling himself when, suddenly, the bottom of his foot is kicked, hard, and hurts at once. “*Hey!*” he cries out.

Matthew, standing over him, slaps his head as he tries to pull away, as Eric cries, “What’re you *doing?*”

“See you got a valentine from Frieda,” Matthew says.

It's an old line of teasing. Not the previous summer, but the summer before that, at an outdoor camp, girls from a neighboring camp visited one afternoon for field events and a marshmallow roast and a young girl named Frieda was said to “like” Eric because he was “nice.” The girl lost a bracelet and Eric, taking on a search—any search challenged something in him—found the bracelet and returned it to her. When the boys in turn visited the girls a day later, the girl invited Eric, within his brother's hearing, to play shuffleboard, and the teasing, launched by Matthew's raised brow at the time, had never quite ceased.

“Mom,” Matthew is calling out. “See the valentine Rockport got from Frieda.”

Making a face at his brother, Eric tries a new tack. “Neat, ain't it,” he says.

All at once, but harder, Matthew backhand slaps Eric's head. Stung, tears starting, Eric whips his foot around in a kick at his brother's shin and misses.

The fight—and Eric's tears—are under way. Matthew kicks a foot, smashing Eric's ribs under his arm as he tries to twist to the side. The fight is real, but there is their mother, shouting at them, “*Stop it! Both of you! Stop it right now!*”

“What a jerk he is,” Matthew says.

“No more!” Claire says. “Eric, my gosh, will you get these cars out of the way!”

Stung again—what did his cars have to do with anything?—Eric picks up one car and then another and tosses them into the shoe box. He would cry out that he hasn't done anything, but it doesn't seem to matter this morning.

“I won't have any more teasing from you,” his mother is saying to his brother. “Certainly not because a girl sent your brother a valentine.”

“Oh, Mom, nobody sent me anything,” Eric cries.

“Well who did what then? What's this all about?”

“He's such a dope,” Matthew says. “Stupid card's from his teacher. Why'd you even bring it home?”

you dumb jerk?"

"Up yours!" Eric wails. "You think you're God or something?"

"Enough!" Claire says. "Not another word from either of you."

Shoving his shoe box of cars and soldiers under the TV table, Eric feels his heart is sinking away. His *teacher*? What an idiot he is, he says to himself. His *teacher*! Mrs. Ackman?

Going along the short hallway, he locks himself in the bathroom and stands with his back to the doorknob. How could anybody be so *dumb*? he thinks.

He sits on the stool cover in a slump, too disappointed with himself to cry. He hopes his brother will try the locked door, in which case he will say he isn't through yet, which answer he will give for two hours at least, hoping Matthew will be unable to avoid disaster.

It isn't Matthew, though, who taps on the door. "Eric?" his mother whispers.

"Who is it?" he says, about to cry again.

"Eric, please open the door," she says.

"I didn't do anything," he says.

"Just open the door. I don't care who did what. Open the door now before I get mad."

He doesn't move, not yet.

"Eric!" she says.

"Okay," he says, going over and turning the handle.

"What is going on with you?" she says, letting herself in.

"Nothing."

She stands there. Who knows about childhood hurt, she wonders. He's had his share, at the hands of his brother mostly, she thinks. Years ago, accidentally Matthew said, he hit Eric across the nose with a baseball bat, an injury that blackened both his eyes. But it was less the injury after all that hurt Eric than a realization later that his nose might all his life bear a somewhat flattened bridge. She recalls finding him closed in this unlighted bathroom, late on a summer afternoon, caught up in an unmanageable heartache. What in the world was wrong? His nose, he cried to her at last. Matthew and the other kids—they said his nose would *always* be like that.

Holding him now, Claire says, "I just don't understand why you two can't get along."

In a breathless whisper, Eric says, "Why is he so *mean* to me? I don't do anything to him."

Claire pauses, looking down at him. Well, she says to herself, that's it. It's gone on long enough. That's it.

"We're going to have a talk," she says to Eric. "Just don't be upset now. We're going to have a talk."

Leaving the bathroom, headed for the living room, she is wondering again how a father, a mother, anyone, would handle this. Uncertain what she is going to say, afraid already the two might turn and laugh at her, she strides into the living room, her heart turning one way and another.

Matthew is on the floor, watching the flickering screen. Above him, Claire says, "We're going to have a pow-wow. Right now. Just turn off the TV."

"I'm *watching* this," Matthew says.

"I said turn off that TV!" Stepping over him, she snaps off the set. "Get in the kitchen—now! Don't make me say it again." For a moment Claire is filled with a desire to fight.

The two slink along before her.

"Matthew," she says. "One thing. One thing. Your brother's name happens to be Eric. It is *not* Rockport—whatever that is supposed to mean. I don't *ever* want to hear you call him that again. Do you understand?"

"Yeah."

"And don't say 'yeah.' Don't you sneer at me. This is a family emergency. And it's going to be

straightened out—now. Or nobody’s leaving here—all day long.”

They sit there. She wonders if she has gained some ground.

“Okay,” she says. “It’s just high time you both understand that we are a family and what that means. We’re a different family, because we don’t happen to have a father here. But we’re still a family, and we sure don’t have any business hurting each other for no reason at all.”

“Oh, Mom,” Matthew says.

“You—just clear the cobwebs out of your ears. It’s you I’m talking to! You act like a juvenile delinquent around here. Maybe I should have laid down the law a long time ago. I don’t know.” She takes a breath, feels she is getting off track. “Now,” she says. “The little boy sitting next to you is your brother. He will turn out to be the best friend you will ever have. I bet you didn’t know that, did you? He’s going to grow up to be a strong young man, and *you* are going to be *proud* of him. I guarantee you of that right now. You’ll be as proud as can be that he’s your own brother. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Matthew says.

“Eric. I don’t think hardly any of this is your fault. Now don’t say a word, Matthew, because it isn’t his fault. Not as much, even, as it’s my fault. I know you’re going to say I favor him, and maybe I do sometimes, because he is the youngest, but it doesn’t mean I don’t love both of you just the same. Matthew, do you hear what I’m saying?”

“I guess so,” he says.

“Okay. Now, there’s something I want both of you to do. And you are not going to get up from here until you do it, either. I want you to promise me that you’ll try, really hard, from now on, to get along with each other.”

Looking at their faces, she adds, “That doesn’t mean there won’t be times you’ll feel mad. That’s only natural. But you are brothers. And we are a family, even if we don’t have a lot of money. Do you hear what I’m saying? Matthew?”

“Yes.”

“Eric?”

“Yup.”

“Good. Okay. Now what I’m going to do, I’m going to ask you, both of you, to say, right now, the time you were most proud of each other.”

“Oh, *Mom*,” Matthew says.

“I know that sounds corny. But this is an emergency. Nobody leaves. Nobody does anything until you do as I say. That’s all there is to it. That’s the way it is going to be.”

The boys exchange a glance of the faintest amusement, and Claire says, “Eric, you go first.”

“What should I say?” Eric says.

“You know what I said to say! Now you do it! When were you most proud of your brother?”

“I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do! Now you say it!”

“I don’t know,” Eric says. “The time, I guess, he took me to the football game at the high school and took me around the field and stands and explained stuff. I guess.”

Eric is looking away from his brother, but Claire is relieved. “Hear that, Matt?” she says. “There’s the time Eric looked up to you. Aren’t you glad of that?”

“I guess.”

“Good. Now it’s your turn.”

Quickly Matthew says, “The time he stomped on the mustard.”

As the two boys laugh, Claire, unable not to join them, says, “What?”

“Nothing,” Matthew says, even as he and Eric keep giggling.

“Well, *tell* me,” Claire says.

“Well . . . we were down by Mister Donut, and this bossy woman told us to clean up the sidewalk. We were just standing there, and this woman who I guess thought she was the principal of the world said, ‘You two—’ And Rockport just took a look at her—”

All three are laughing hard.

“He just took a look at her,” Matthew cries, “and lifted his foot—and stomped! And the mustard went *bloop* . . .”

“Okay,” Claire is saying. “That woman shouldn’t have been so bossy, but that wasn’t a very nice thing—”

“Oh, Mom,” Matthew says.

“Okay,” Claire says. “But tell me when you were really proud—”

“*Then!*” Matthew says, and a new explosion of laughter breaks from the two boys.

“Well, tell me something else, too,” Claire says.

“Well, I guess the time he spotted this big pheasant down by Damart. It was in a field there—the humongous bird—it scared me when I saw it. Old Rockport though—I mean Eric—went right after it like some big-game hunter. I thought, gee, he’s a pretty tough little kid.”

Eric, thrilled and embarrassed, cannot help laughing, and listening.

“You caught a pheasant?” Claire says.

“No, we just chased it,” Matthew says.

Claire glances from one to the other. “Eric, see? Matt likes you. As his brother. Don’t you, Matt?”

“Yes-yes-yes,” Matthew says.

“And you like Matt, too, don’t you?”

“I guess I do,” Eric says.

“Pride . . . is a kind of love,” Claire says. “You know?”

There is no response. “Okay, that’s all I wanted to hear,” she says. Getting up from the table she adds, before the moment is lost, “Have some chili now, if you like.”

Moving to the stove, raising her eyes to the ceiling in amazement—with them and with herself—she dips the wooden spoon into the pot. She is going to take a taste but doesn’t. She glances back at the two boys, on a thought—to tell them to hold fast to each other as long as they live—but it’s nothing she knows how to say.

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