

**HARD
CASE**



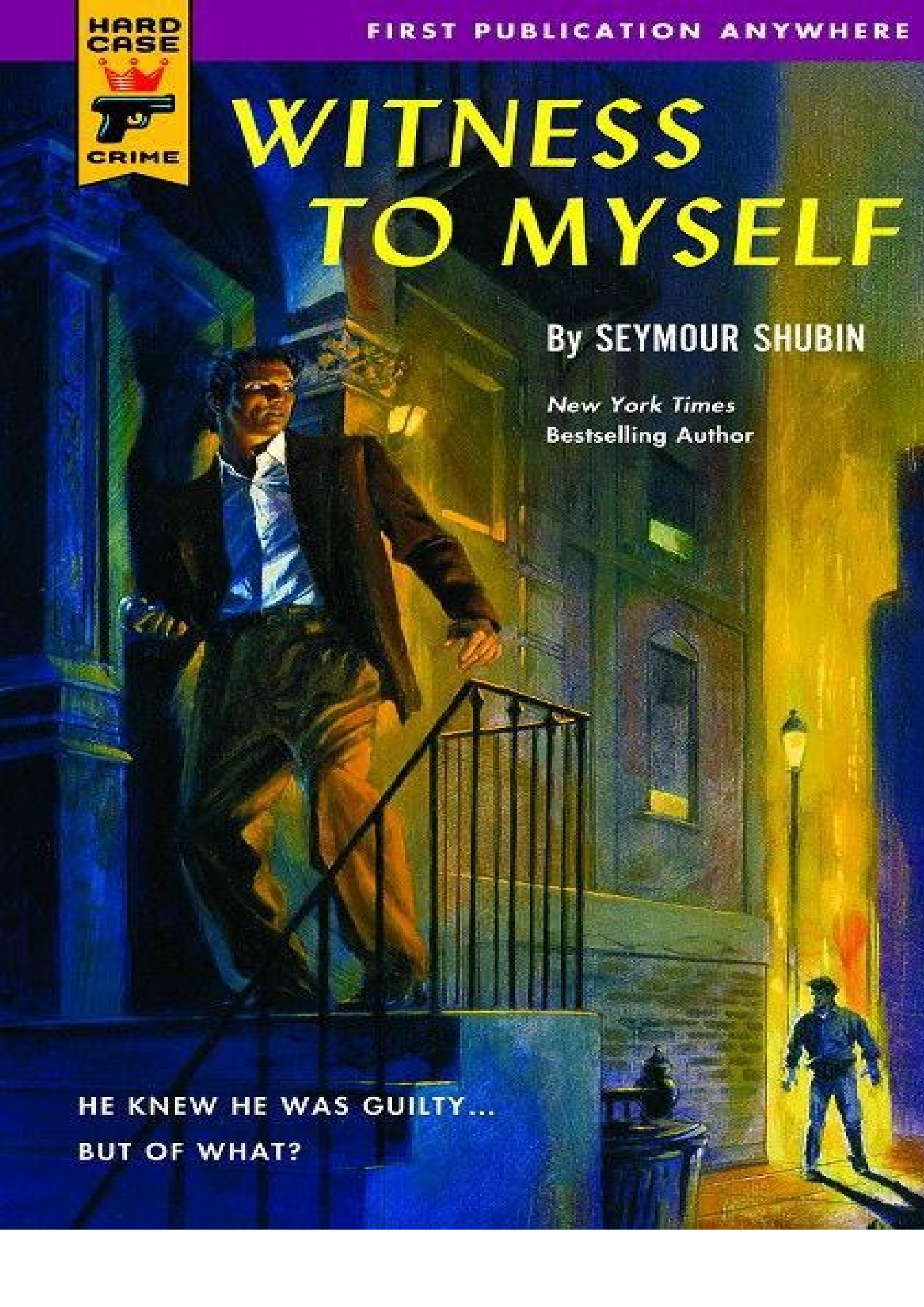
FIRST PUBLICATION ANYWHERE

WITNESS TO MYSELF

By SEYMOUR SHUBIN

New York Times
Bestselling Author

HE KNEW HE WAS GUILTY...
BUT OF WHAT?



**HARD
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CRIME

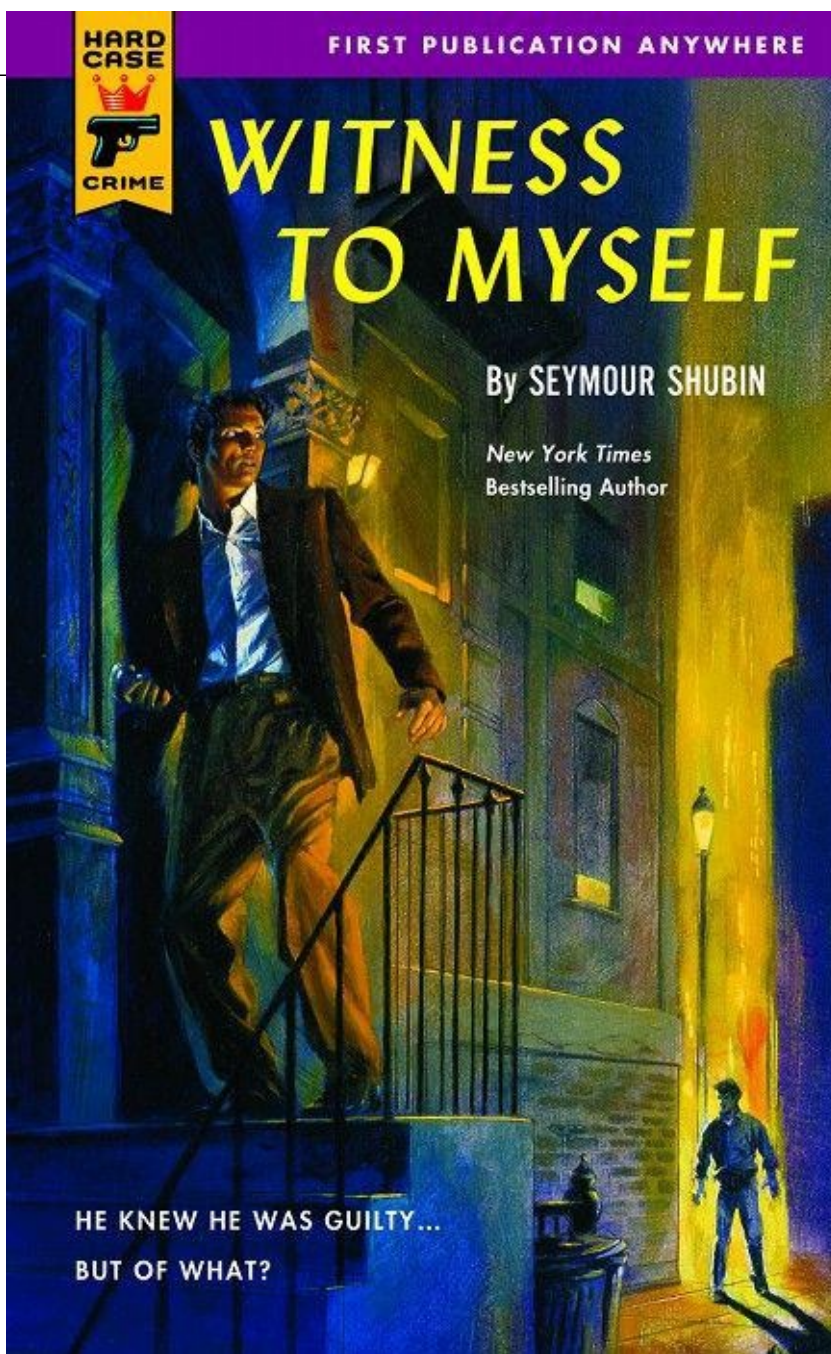
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Raves for the Work of

SEYMOUR SHUBIN!

“First-rate writing, marvelous characterization, believable dialogue, intelligence, gripping suspense that never lets up until the thrilling denouement... A rare find that contributes to the notion that we are experiencing a new Golden Age of mystery writing.”

—Jonathan Kellerman

“Shubin understands that the recipe for good fiction is set in stone: (1) grab reader by throat; (2) squeeze till limp.”

—*Philadelphia Inquirer*

“[Shubin] has brought off a bizarre and blistering rarity. Expertly handled.”

—*Newsweek*

“A masterfully written dark crime novel... It deserves to be up there on the same shelf as James M. Cain’s *Double Indemnity*.”

—*Dave Zeltserman, Hardluck Stories*

“Shubin’s novel is recommended as a must for those who like their fiction with the explosive quality of a 16-inch shell.”

—*San Francisco Call*

“A chilling work of psychological suspense.”

—*Pirate Writings*

“Heart-clutching... leaves one profoundly affected.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Shubin’s novel is simply splendid in every respect, from its ingenious plot to its complex and fully realized characters. His staccato style, deceptively simple, propels the action along at a heart-pounding pace.”

—*San Diego Union*

“Good... for readers looking for excruciating 3-D suspense.”

—*The New York Post*

“Shubin’s prose takes us first by the hand, and then by the throat.”

—*Carl Brookins*

“Shubin’s style of novel is a breakaway from the predictable... The books he writes are a genre of their own, explorations of sociopathy... Shubin, who has had many prior successes, has triumphed with this one, the pages of which the reader will scarf up like potato chips.”

—*G. Miki Hayden*

“Tight prose and a tense plot, smoothly told.”

—*Library Journal*

“The tension never lets up.”

—*Dorothy Salisbury Davis, MWA Grandmaster*

“Shubin’s terse prose lends a noirlike quality to this engaging suspense tale... A first-rate story, sharp dialogue, and a compelling lead character make this a standout.”

—*Booklist*

“A masterful job.”

—*ForeWord Magazine*

“Seymour Shubin has an enviable knack as a novelist, the ability to combine a philosophical plot with some of the finest action writing you’ll run across in American literature.”

—*Oklahoma City Oklahoman*

“[A] superb mystery.”

—*The Snooper*

“Shubin draws his characters with precision inside a tense, suspenseful plot that moves to an explosive finale. It’s a powerful story.”

—*Los Angeles Daily Breeze*

“Riveting suspense and intense human feeling. compelling and convincing.”

—*Greenwich Time & Times Mirror*

“Shubin drives home his point that only a superficial line exists between man and beast. He frightens you with his message and he tells it brilliantly.”

—*Cincinnati Enquirer*

“The horrifying air of authenticity... must be attributed entirely to the author’s skill. On turning the first page one is lost immediately in a nightmare world.”

—*Sunday London Times*

“A brilliant, poignant and terrible book. It is the story of a murder beside which the average American thriller reads like a fairy story.”

—*Montrose Review*

“When a first-class novelist equipped to the full with narrative and descriptive power, turns his attention to the plain, unvarnished presentation of a murder... the result can well be almost terrifying.”

—*Liverpool Daily Press*

“A storyteller with a terrific punch.”

—*Bethlehem PA Globe Times*

“Guaranteed to stimulate your sluggish corpuscles... Not recommended for insomnia.”

—*Salt Lake City Tribune*

The snow was beginning to come down even harder now but he could see that the sky ahead was almost a summer blue. He began looking on the weather more and more as the proper crazy setting for what he was doing. And the questions he'd been trying to suppress ever since he started this drive were coming back like hammer blows.

What if I find out I did kill her? What then?

He almost closed his eyes to the splattering snow and the sweeping wipers.

But it can't be!

Then why are you going back there?

To clear his head of it once and for all, he kept telling himself. To be free in a way he hadn't been since that day.

But then why did a part of him want to turn the car around?

He was aware all at once of how slowly he'd begun to drive, as if to make this last hundred and fifty miles stretch on forever. And, even though reluctantly, he stepped a little harder on the gas...

OTHER NOVELS
BY SEYMOUR SHUBIN:

ANYONE'S MY NAME
MANTA
WELLVILLE, USA
THE CAPTAIN
HOLY SECRETS
VOICES
NEVER QUITE DEAD
REMEMBER ME ALWAYS
FURY'S CHILDREN
MY FACE AMONG STRANGERS
THE GOOD AND THE DEAD
A MATTER OF FEAR
THE MAN FROM YESTERDAY

WITNESS to MYSELF

by Seymour Shubin



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For Talia Grace Levine

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Chapter One

I had no idea how tormented he was. None. And what torments me is wondering if I could have helped him. I mean, from the time he was a kid, when we were both kids.

Alan and I were cousins, the only children of two sisters. We lived for quite a few years in the same neighborhood, in fact only four houses apart. And being five years older, I was like a big brother to him, more than just a cousin. He used to enjoy being in my company, following me around, which took on as my role even though once in a while, like all little kids, he was a nuisance.

Of course things changed as we grew older, as we followed separate careers, different interests. But we still called and saw each other now and then; and when I got married, he was my best man.

So what torments me is that maybe — no, not maybe, surely — I could have helped him, starting when he was a kid, been a true big brother. And then, later on, surely there was a clue here and there to his troubles, all of which I missed not only despite our closeness but despite the books and many articles I have written on crime.

I tell myself now that I should have done this, that, or whatever. But one of the things I'm not sure about is whether I would have advised him to make that trip to Cape Cod or just let things be.

I do know from what he told me that for almost every mile of that trip he was torn apart by doubts.

Turn back, he kept telling himself. Turn back, turn back.

You don't have to know if you killed her, he told himself. You've lived all these years, fifteen years, without knowing. And you've got a good life that you're going to destroy, you're only thirty, a lawyer, you have someone you love, and a new career, one where you can do so much good. You've never had it better. For God's sake turn around!

He told me that when it really hit him like this he was only about ten miles from home, had some three hundred more to go. But despite his pleas to himself he drove on, trying to assure himself that he could turn back at any point. And what's more, even if he did go on it wasn't as if he was going there to confess. And the point was, there might be nothing to confess. He really didn't know if he'd killed her; hurt her, yes, he'd hurt her, but killed her? He was sure he hadn't. He'd run from the scene in terror, falling, jumping up, running on, a kid in horror at himself, a fifteen-year-old kid who had never knowingly hurt anyone in his life, afraid at that moment that he'd killed her, but then gradually, back in his home and over the years that followed, sure he hadn't.

Except at those times when he wasn't sure, and a flame would sweep through his whole body.

It was winter, mid-February, but the highway under the bright sky was free of snow except on the shoulders and on the dark limbs of trees. And it was pretty much free of cars.

He wasn't even sure how he would find out. The answer lay in one of the towns on Cape Cod, South Minton. He had found out the name of the newspaper there, the Cape Cod Breeze, a daily, and had looked it up on his computer, trying to go back to July 8, 1989; but the paper's Web site only had stories as far back as '92. And he hadn't seen anything about such a crime in the handful of other newspapers throughout the state he'd been able to find online. Nor had he seen it, on the several occasions he'd dared to look, on any of the "unsolved true crime" shows on television.

So how did he expect to find out now? The newspaper office was one way, of course, and if not there, the public library, or maybe a paper in another town up there. But all of these options could be risky, might arouse suspicion, even though he would ask for papers starting way before that day and ending way after.

He just had to know.

He felt as if he couldn't go on any longer with Anna, or even with his new work, if he didn't know.

His eyes kept checking the gas: It was getting low and he would have to stop soon. Only at that moment did something strike him, although of course he had known it all along — that this was the same highway they had taken, his mother and father and him, in that motor home they'd rented.

And he remembered the three of them even, yes, singing.

Chapter Two

Actually, it was completely out of character — both Alan and I agreed on this — for his father to rent a mobile home. His parents had moved out of Philadelphia and into the suburbs when Alan was eleven. They had also owned a summer house in the Pocono Mountains, about seventy miles away, so they used to spend most of their vacations there, sometimes with us. But then they sold it and his father came up with the idea of renting one of these mobile things for about a month, starting off by visiting a few East Coast beaches and then heading into Maine and up to Cape Cod. It was a large motor home, some thirty feet or so. My aunt was hesitant at first: He was sixty and had never driven one before except for a short practice run at the dealer's. But as it turned out there was to be no problem with that; even she drove it a little. No, not with that.

My uncle had been forty-five — and my aunt thirty-nine — when Alan was born, which I mention because their ages came to worry Alan as a small boy, mainly because they were much older than his friends' parents. He had learned about death firsthand when our grandfather died, and at first it scared him that one day, without fail, he would be in a coffin. But then his Concern began to focus on them, that they would die long before him.

My uncle was a lawyer, mostly in real estate law, and my aunt a stay-at-home mom. From what Alan used to tell me, he was sure he was going to be a lawyer too, though not in his father's specialty — somehow it came to him that he would be a criminal lawyer. And the way he talked about it to me it wouldn't be about saving criminals but saving the innocent. But oh how that was to change.

They were rich though not, except in my mind, super-rich. After leaving our neighborhood for the suburbs, they lived in an area of fairly large homes, ones with long circular driveways. Alan began going to private schools. The best friend he had as a small boy was a kid named Will Jansen; in fact, as he told me, he didn't think he ever loved any friend more, though he was never to see him again after moving out of our neighborhood, except once, much later, on a television interview program. I remembered them doing so much together and talking about everything, except — strangely, though perhaps not — about what was happening to their changing bodies as they entered adolescence, about the strange new directions Alan found his boyish fantasies taking.

His father — Alan didn't even think of talking to him about sex, undoubtedly because his dad had never talked to him about the subject. Alan looked on him simply as a hardworking, brilliant man who lived for his mother and him. And his mother, in his mind, was asexual. In fact the only thing he remembered her ever saying to him that had any kind of sexual connotation was a remark she made one time when she looked up from the newspaper she was reading and, out of nowhere (though probably had something to do with what she had been reading), said to him, "It's important that you treat a girl like a flower. Like a flower." And that was all; she went back to her reading, and it left Alan so uneasy, as though she'd said it to something dark inside him. Nor did I, his big-brother cousin, ever say anything to him; it was easier not to, and in a way, as I see it now, it was as if I was protecting him, the way I used to protect him, say, from crossing the street on a red light. And so when, late in grade school, a certain tall, ungainly half-idiot in special-ed, Henry, would come up to him and other kids in the schoolyard and grin with large teeth and make fast, long strokes of his clenched hand in the air, Alan had no idea what it meant. Until one day, alone in the gray silence of his house, he found out. It was the end of his childhood, and the start of a new phase of his life characterized by bewilderment and self-loathing.

As I was to learn, Alan often envied me because my mother was smart-looking, "modern," dating frequently between marriages and laughed loudly. And he couldn't help envying me because I was

allowed to do things he never could, like go to overnight camp or live with friends in Italy one summer when I was only twelve; and though I lived apart from my father it seemed in Alan's eyes that I went to just about every kind of ballgame with him. But it was just to a few.

Now I don't want to give anyone the idea that Alan was some kind of creep as a kid. He was good in school, was never so much as scolded by a teacher, never lied that I knew about (his mother had a certain expression, "A liar and a thief are the same thing, they steal something from you"), was a decent athlete: fairly tall, skinny, he was on the soccer and tennis teams in high school. Unlike me, he didn't smoke pot or, except for a few experiments, cigarettes; had friends, though none he felt he could really open up to about what was troubling him about sex; they all seemed so confident. By the time he was fifteen he hadn't gone out on a one-to-one date but had been to some parties and church — Lutheran — dances, though he could never relax when he danced, was stiff and uncomfortable. He'd never kissed a girl, except when he was a kid at one of those spin-the-bottle things.

His father worked late most nights, coming home after Alan and his mother had dinner, and he took a lot of business trips. But he occasionally took Alan to a ballgame, and he generally saw to it that they went fishing on at least the first day of trout season. He gave Alan a good feeling about reading, and neither he nor my aunt made a big fuss about him watching too much TV. My uncle was tall, six-feet, slender, with gray-streaked brown hair; Alan sort of looked like him, though he had black hair and was a little shorter, about five-eleven.

My aunt was of medium height and a little heavysset, with a round pretty face and short sandy hair that was gradually turning gray; a good cook and housekeeper though she always had a twice-a-week maid. She used to tell Alan stories about her childhood, always happy ones, but once in a sudden burst of tears she told him she'd had a miscarriage a few years before he was born: late enough so that she knew it was a girl. It was the first and last time she ever mentioned it. But Alan often thought of the little girl who would have been his older sister.

That flower.

Chapter Three

Alan stopped at the first service station he came to and filled the tank and bought a bottle of water at its so-called mini-mart. As he was pulling out it began to snow, tiny dots at first on the windshield and then heavy splatters. He found himself wishing it was the start of a blizzard, that soon he wouldn't be able to drive on; but that, he told himself, was crazy, he could turn around at any time. But in any event the snow stopped shortly; he had driven under a black bloated cloud and now was in sunshine again.

The weather had been perfect every day of that trip fifteen years ago but the trip itself had started off wrong. For one thing, he was angry at his parents and at himself. They had come to him with the idea of this vacation as if it were a done deal, when he had a first-time job he was looking forward to as an assistant sports counselor at a day camp.

"Come on," his father said, "you've got your whole life to work. Don't ruin this, we're a family and it's probably something we'll never do again."

"But you could have asked me, couldn't you?" he demanded. "You could have at least asked me."

"Alan," his mother said, "don't raise your voice. You always raise your voice."

"I'm not raising my voice." Always, it seemed, he was being warned about a fiery temper he didn't know he had. And this would only make him angrier. "I'm just talking, I'm just making my point."

"Well, then just talk," she said.

Eventually he gave in without much more of an argument than that, though the feeling of being treated like a baby, hardly anything new, smoldered in him.

And then, the second way it started off wrong was that his mother and father had a fight on the road about ten miles into the trip.

They hardly ever fought but when they did it was as though, to him as with most kids probably, his world was in collapse.

This time it was over something as trivial as his father's sunglasses.

His father asked her as he was driving to get them out of the glove compartment. When she couldn't find them he said, "You put them in there, didn't you? I asked you to."

"Well, I did."

"Then they're in there. Look for them again."

She went through the compartment again. "No, they're not. You must have taken them out. Try to remember."

"Don't tell me to remember. I didn't take them out."

"Bob, please. Check your pockets."

"I told you I didn't take them out." But he patted at his shirt and then dug into his pants pocket. "I don't have them. Now you try to remember. Did you really put them in there?"

"Of course I did."

"Well, they're not there and I don't have them!"

"Then they must have fallen out of your pocket."

"Christ, will you stop that? I told you I never took them out!"

"Bob, don't yell at me."

"Yell at you! Yell at you! You don't know what yelling is!"

And on it went, in that luxury motor home, their voices growing louder and more accusatory. And though Alan loved his father deeply, he was the one he always hated when they quarreled.

The shouting back and forth gradually turned into silence, then the tension in the silence began to ease up when his father found his glasses when he reached under his seat, where they'd fallen. He apologized, several times, but Alan's mother stayed silent for a while. But then, looking out her window, she began remarking about the beauty of the bay they were crossing over, so blue and dazzling in the sun; and soon they were a family again.

My own mother and her new husband — a marriage that would last about five more months ending in her second divorce — had rented a beach-front house (on pilings) for a couple of weeks on Sea Belle, on the New Jersey seashore. I was nineteen, a junior at Bucknell, and was spending the weekend with them before going back to my summer job moving things from one place to another in a large wholesale grocery warehouse. I didn't like the guy and wasn't all that happy about being there. But I was looking forward to seeing Alan and his folks, who'd said they would be visiting for a few hours before moving on.

I remember their large motor home pulling up in front of the house, and marveling that my uncle was driving one for the first time at his age. He represented to me all the security in the world, a little remote but solid, just as my aunt was all smiling warmth. I envied Alan his parents, though that didn't mean I wasn't crazy about my mother. Thin where my aunt was a little heavy, she sold dresses at a luxury department store, loved to laugh, was the first on the dance floor at weddings, and thought she could do no wrong. I just wished she had better taste in men, including my father, who was living somewhere or other.

Alan had a nice smile, and we slapped each other's hand hello. In a way, he was still a kid to me at fifteen; it wasn't easy to let go of the memory of once making sure he held my hand when I crossed a street. He was thin and as tall as he would ever be, just as at his age I was already my present six-one.

After the usual hugging, they showed us through the motor home, something that only enhanced my feeling of their togetherness, and after lunch we went out to the beach. I remember walking single file along the path through the high dune that almost hid the ocean from the street. Long tufts of grass speckled the dune and there was a partly buried line of wire-strung palings along both sides of the path.

The beach was fairly crowded; a lifeguard stand was about a half-block away. A few people waved to us as we came out. We set up the chairs we'd been carrying and put up a large beach umbrella, though no one sat under it.

As I remember, I was talking to Alan about a soccer game he'd been in when another couple, the Devlins, who were friends of my mother from home and were staying nearby, walked over to say hello. He was a rather short, bald-headed man, his wife a homely woman, gaunt-faced and with a slightly hooked nose and red-tinted hair. They set up their chairs to sit for "just a few minutes," Mrs. Devlin said.

It was shortly after this that my aunt said, "Alan, let me put some sunblock on you." She was leaning forward in her chair, holding out the bottle toward him.

"Not right now."

"The sun's very strong, you're going to get burned."

"I said I will, not just now." He was obviously annoyed.

"I'm telling you," she warned gently.

He turned away and looked down the beach. He was obviously embarrassed, a teenager's embarrassment, that she was still holding out the bottle when he'd said no; I could just see him thinking, God, didn't she understand no? The ocean was a deep green with high breakers that were bringing in some seaweed; the sand had a black fringe near the water's edge. People were jumping up and down in the waves, or diving under them, or streaking on rafts to the beach. I noticed him

watching a couple of girls in bikinis talking up to the two lifeguards on the stand; noticed it because was looking there too.

“Alan,” Mrs. Devlin suddenly directed a question at him, “are you driving yet?”

“No,” his mother answered for him, “he’s got a year to go.”

“Oh my, just wait till he’s sixteen.”

“Oh I can’t wait for that scene,” my aunt said, and because she and the others were smiling, Alan apparently felt he had to smile too, though he was obviously embarrassed.

“How are the girls treating you?” Mr. Devlin asked him.

He shrugged and with this his father said, “The girls? I don’t think he’s going out with girls yet.”

It wasn’t the first time Alan had heard him refer to girls in this way when it had something to do with him. He didn’t know why but it was as though his father had a problem not just with the word but with the idea of him with girls. Alan looked away, hoping that would deflect conversation from him and it did. But soon he was looking back. He looked at Mrs. Devlin, who was turned the other way talking with his mother. She had on a green one-piece bathing suit, a wide-brimmed straw hat, and sunglasses that had bits of colored shell on the frames. Homely though she was, she was well built with long shapely legs.

He turned away when she looked back.

He asked me if I wanted to go in the water and I thought about it and then shook my head. He stood up, thinking, as he would recall it, that if his mother said anything like be careful, which wouldn’t have bothered him any other time, he would have broken, red-faced, into a run. But she didn’t. He had always been a good swimmer and the water was just cold enough for him. He dove under a wave and then another, and then swam beyond where they were breaking and continued parallel to the beach. When he came out he shook away the towel my aunt handed him and started to sit down but then remained standing.

Actually he was telling himself to sit down, just sit down, but even though it had become an outright plea now he still remained standing. And then he said, “I’ll be right back, I want to get something from the car.”

My mother said, “You want the bathroom, use the house. There are two.”

“No, I want to get something.”

His father must have turned off the air conditioning, so the heat of the motor home blasted him when he opened the door, but he didn’t put it back on, telling himself he would just change into dry trunks and go out again. He locked the door and changed, but instead of leaving he sat down on the sofa. Behind his closed eyes he sought a face, a body. He thought of the two girls at the lifeguard stand, of some movie actresses, of some centerfolds and of bra and panty ads, and then, almost reluctantly, of Mrs. Devlin.

He tried to fight against it, knowing he would despise himself, already half despising himself. But gradually that homely face took on a kind of smile it didn’t have in real life.

Give it to Mrs. Devlin, she was saying, please honey, give it to Mrs. Devlin.

From what I was to learn, they stopped at a couple of places in Maine, then headed up to the tip of Cape Cod, to Provincetown. They thought they might stay there at least one night but it felt too crowded and they started to head back. But soon my uncle began exploring and pulled into a wide dirt lane that led through thick woods to the top of a high dune overlooking an empty beach and the ocean.

My aunt said, “Are we allowed to stay here?”

“I don’t know,” my uncle said. “I don’t see why not.”

“Did you know when you turned off it would lead to the ocean?”

“I thought it might.”

“Do you have any idea where we are?”

~~“Well, I saw a sign.”~~

They were, he said, on the outskirts of South Minton.

Chapter Four

Alan got up about eleven the next morning, which was late for him, and was a little surprised that his parents were just getting up too. He stepped outside, into a bright clear day, and walked to the edge of the dune: The beach was empty as far as he could see to either side. After breakfast the three of them half-slid, half-walked down the dune, carrying a blanket and a couple of small sand chairs. They had some paperbacks and a transistor radio that they didn't turn on. Alan sat on the blanket, a book in his hand. He was tan by now, didn't need sunblock anymore.

He had recently gotten into Salinger, and one of the books he'd brought along was a collection of his short stories. But he found it hard to concentrate and put it down. He looked at the ocean, which was fairly calm that day. As he stared at it his thoughts began drifting and then went back in time and settled on Mrs. Devlin. How, he asked himself for the dozenth time, could he have thought of that with her? And yet remembering what his mind had done to those legs and even that hooked nose and that terrible red hair gave him an answer that he could feel all over again. He got up and said he was going in the water.

"Hey, just remember," his mother said, "there's no lifeguard around here."

He nodded, walking away before his father might decide to explain to him again about riptides and how if you got caught in one you shouldn't try to fight it but swim parallel to the beach until you could swim in. But he didn't go too far out, just enough past the waves where he could swim easily. When he came back he said he was going for a run. This, they expected: He loved running, had run as far as twenty miles a few times, though he knew he could run much farther. He took off slowly along the surf. The woods stretched on above the dunes to his left; he couldn't see a house.

After about half a mile he took another swim, this time a quick one, and then, because the sun was so bright and he wasn't wearing sunglasses, he decided to run back through the woods if possible. He didn't know if there was any kind of trail back there or if his bare feet could take it. But he liked the idea of testing and toughening his feet.

He climbed up the dune at a spot where there was an opening in the woods. He walked in about fifty feet and found a sandy trail through the trees, but it went in the opposite direction from where they were parked. He started walking along it, then began jogging again, slowly, taking in the silence and feel of the woods, which he'd always associated with Indians ever since he was a kid. In fact he used to daydream as a kid about being an Indian boy, in a loincloth or naked and running free.

He ran a short distance and then stopped at a lane that went to his right to the beach. He was about to turn back when he saw a girl of about twelve standing looking at him and then up at the trees and then back to him. Her skin was light brown, and she had long glistening black hair. She was wearing a two-piece bathing suit, the halter flat.

He said, "Do you want something?"

Without answering she pointed to a tree. He saw a red kite caught on one of the lower limbs.

"I'll see if I can get it for you."

He had to go a few yards back on the lane and then went in among the trees. The kite was on a thin limb that grew, twisted, toward the ground but it was a little beyond his reach. He jumped up and after a couple of tries caught the limb in his hand and bent it down. Stretching out his arm he grabbed hold of the kite and shook it free from the branch and it floated down. He noticed now that it was torn. When he started to walk to the lane with it, he saw that she'd come in a few feet and was standing there, looking at him.

"You know," he said, "it really wasn't worth the trouble. It's no good anyway, it's got," and he used a word that he only wished he could take back, "a hole in it. Can you see the hole?"

She didn't answer. She kept looking at him.

~~"It's got a hole in it," he repeated.~~

He found himself staring back at her. She was such a pretty thing, her large eyes as black as his hair. Her bathing suit hugged her firm slender body.

Suddenly he wanted to say that word again.

"Do you know what a hole is?"

She still didn't answer.

He told himself to get out of there, to run from there, but instead he kneeled down and put his forefinger on her groin. She gave a quick gasp. But she didn't move, as if frozen. He started to stand up, heart galloping, still begging himself to run, run, to get away from this girl and these silent trees and back into the sun, but instead he stooped down again and hooked his finger under the swimsuit between her legs, to feel her skin.

"Stop," she shouted. "Stop it!"

She started to pull back, then began to cry. A cry that was like a fire alarm in his brain.

"Don't," he pleaded, jumping up. "Don't cry, please don't cry. You can go. I'm sorry, you can go."

She whirled and started to run, still crying. Terrified, he grabbed her shoulder. "Don't tell — please don't tell."

"Let me go! Let go!"

"Listen to me. Please."

She started to shake free and he grabbed her again, this time hooking his arm around her throat and her cry was cut off. He began dragging her deeper among the trees and threw her down. He stared at her, lying motionless face down. He stood there for several moments, but she still didn't move. A part of him wanted to kneel down to feel for breath, but instead he began to run. He ran deep into the trees, ran stumbling, soon suddenly lost, not knowing in which direction was his home — the motionless home was home — then running just to keep running.

He was sure he had killed her.

Chapter Five

He kept running in panic, this way, that. At one point the woods opened to another lane and he took it, but it led to the beach and he didn't want to be seen on the beach; it was as though people were already looking for him, would point and yell and come racing after him. He ran back into the woods again but couldn't find the narrow trail he'd been on, and he made his way around trees, jumping over fallen limbs, heading in first one direction and then the other. And then he saw sunlight ahead between the trees. It was another lane to the beach, and this one was where the motor home was parked.

He ran inside and closed and locked the door. He almost crumpled to the floor but stood there trembling violently, his arms around his chest. He was still trembling as he lowered himself to crouch, then covered his face with his hands, fingers digging into his skin. Oh God, oh God, what did I do?

The police would come here, they would grab him, they would put him in handcuffs, they would take him away, everything was over! And Mom and Dad — oh God, Mom and Dad!

Why hadn't he just run from her? Why had he stayed? And why that?

He began to cry. He cried until he couldn't any more, and then out of sheer weakness he dropped across the sofa, his face in his arms.

He leaped up, hearing a rattling of the door.

The police?

The police!

But he slowly opened the door to his mother. She was looking at him in anger.

"Why didn't you come back to us? You had us worried!"

"I-I'm sorry."

"Sorry. Sorry. That was the dumbest thing. You had us scared. And why was this door locked?"

"I don't know. I just got tired."

His father came in then. "What's going on here?"

"He was here sleeping all this time."

My uncle addressed him. "You should have come back. You had your mother worried."

"Like you weren't," my aunt said to him. And then a look of dismay crossed her face. "Alan, you're bleeding on the floor. What happened to your feet?"

He sat down and looked at the bottom of his feet. One of them had a small cut. He hadn't even felt any pain.

"Where were you?" his mother demanded.

"I guess... in the woods." He didn't even want to say that; didn't want to place himself anywhere.

"You guess? You guess? What do you mean you guess?"

"I was in the woods, I was running in the woods." From the way they were looking at him he was sure they knew he had done something terrible, something beyond belief.

"Alan, don't raise your voice at me. That was the dumbest thing. Running in the woods. Bob," she said, turning to my uncle, "bring me a wet washcloth. And the Neosporin or Polysporin, I don't know which I brought. And a Band-Aid."

But all my cousin was thinking now was: Let's get away from here! Drive away! Oh hurry, hurry!

They did leave, an hour and a half later, but his father drove only about a mile down the road, to an intersection where a sign — with an arrow pointing to the right — read: SOUTH MINTON.

"Let's take a look at the town," he said.

"No," Alan cried out, "let's go on, I'm tired!"

"What's the matter?" his mother asked.

"I'm just tired."

~~"Tired?" his father repeated, with a look over his shoulder at him. "What're you so tired from?"~~

"I don't know." He was desperate.

"Look, you're not making sense. Go back to sleep if you want to. I just want to see the place

And he turned in the arrow's direction.

Alan almost dropped to the floor, to try to hide from the town. He couldn't think and was too close to bursting out in tears and saying something about the girl, but instead he remembered the car on his foot and said, "My foot is bothering me."

"Oh it'll be fine," his mother said, "with the antibiotic and the Band-Aid."

"It should teach you not to run barefoot where you shouldn't," his father said. Then, "Hey, this is a very nice town."

But Alan didn't look. He went back to the sofa and lay across it, below the windows, his arms across his eyes and his eyes squeezed tight, terrified that he would hear sirens coming closer behind them. Then even after they drove from the town about a half hour later, it was miles before he dared peek out a window, still half-expecting to see police cars pulling alongside of them.

Please God, he kept praying silently, help me, please dear Jesus help me.

But at some point he stopped. For he began picturing that girl on Jesus's lap and him holding her tight and rocking back and forth. And for the first time, his hands on either side of his head, he stopped thinking only of himself.

Oh little girl I'm sorry, I'm sorry!

Just as, earlier, there had been times when he wished the trip was already over, times when he didn't feel like being closed in with his parents anymore, now he found himself wishing it would last forever. The motor home had become a fortress for him. Even when hundreds of miles away from South Minton, he dreaded stepping out of the trailer to go on a beach or have dinner or sightsee. And he was afraid of the end of the trip, was terrified of what he would find at home: a police car parked at the curb.

To his dismay his father broke the trip off after only another five days: Something had come up and he had to get back to the office. But as they turned into their street and headed toward their house Alan almost let out a sob of relief. No police car was waiting. Only the quiet, cool brightness of the house.

Chapter Six

As Alan drove on to South Minton, he found himself thinking that the weather was like the working of his own head in that it didn't seem to know what to do. He had driven only about fifteen miles from the service station when it began snowing again: Gray bulbous clouds had moved in swiftly and covered the sky. It was a heavy snow this time but a wet one, the kind his wipers cleared away easily.

After about forty more miles he pulled into a truck stop for lunch, the only decent-looking place to eat for the past several miles. Actually he wasn't hungry at all; this was, he was aware at the time, a way of slowing up the ride, of giving himself more of a chance to really decide, perhaps to change his mind.

The parking lot held a scattering of eighteen-wheelers. For a few moments their large cabs, most of them with an overhead bunk, seemed to hold a kind of security; it gave him something of the feeling he'd had as a small kid when, while looking at certain picture books, he would envy the squirrels and rabbits the warmth and coziness of their little homes in tree trunks.

Sitting at one of two fairly crowded semi-circular counters, he ordered a grilled cheese sandwich and a cup of coffee. While he was waiting, the man next to him, a big fellow, a driver, glanced over from his platter of veal and French fries. "You won't believe this but I've only had one heartburn in my life."

Alan was hardly in a mood to talk. But he said, trying hard to be polite, "Really. You're lucky."

"And I've never gotten rid of it," he grinned.

"Well, you got me."

"Sorry, but that was just pulled on me."

The fellow began telling him how he drove all over the country, almost always with another guy, though not this time, and it was really a good life for the most part. Then soon after the man returned to his meal, he looked over at the next counter where another man, a woman and a boy of about four had just sat down.

"Stu," he called. "Marie."

"Hey there," Stu called back, and Marie, a husky woman, gave him a big smile.

"I forget the little fellow's name," he apologized.

"Billy," she said.

"Hi, Billy, how are you?" Then, after not even getting a look from the boy, he said to them, "Where you heading?"

"Albuquerque," the man answered, "You?"

"Detroit, then Chicago."

Soon afterward he said to Alan in a low voice, "They own their own rig. She started sharing the driving when they got married, and they've been taking the kid since he was born."

Alan looked at them, the father holding a menu to his face, the mother talking to the boy who was playing with a little fire engine on the counter.

Finished with lunch, Alan stalled a little more, began looking around the place. It had just about everything an overnight trucker would need, including a food and toiletries market and, in the back, showers and some bunks. But there was no way of stalling any more, and he went out to his car and pulled out on the road fast, only to slow to the speed limit almost immediately. He always tried to go under the speed limit, which used to give his friends a big laugh. But he didn't ever want to be stopped by a cop.

Soon his thoughts began drifting back to the couple and their son at the counter. How he envied them having each other.

A wife, a family — if he didn't turn back he could be giving up even a hope of that, forever.

He couldn't remember exactly when he began thinking that he might not have killed her. But it had to have started after the first few months, when not only didn't the police show up but he saw nothing in the news about any crime in or around South Minton. Still, he was always anxious when he read or watched the news and, much later, when he watched, whenever he dared to, one TV show in particular about unsolved crimes, always wondering with a fast-beating heart would her face appear, and the afterward feeling great waves of relief when it didn't.

“What're you watching that junk for?” his mother asked him once.

He said something quickly like, “It's interesting.” But it was as if he'd been caught at something.

Gradually, whenever he summoned up the courage to think back and try to pick apart that horror, he became almost sure that he couldn't have killed her, that his arm had never been hooked that tight around her neck. In fact, as he'd pulled her back among the trees, he'd loosened his grip, and his other hand had taken hold of her swimsuit strap and shoulder. And so he might have only stunned her or knocked her unconscious when he threw her to the ground.

The day before he'd had to go back to school after the trip — he was a junior in high school — his father came into his room, where he was trying to win a game of chess against the computer. His father looked so solemn that Alan's heart leaped. His father sat down on a chair facing him.

“Alan, I want to talk to you about something. And I hope it doesn't get you angry.”

Alan just stared at him.

“I should have talked to you about this before but I was really afraid you'd get angry. And I didn't think you needed it. In fact I still don't. But your mother and I, you know, feel I should. It's about drugs.”

Alan almost sighed.

“I'm sure you're not involved in anything like that,” his father hurried on, “but I just wanted to say it. It's more, you know, it's more for me than you.” And he smiled, waiting for Alan to say something.

“I haven't taken any drugs,” he said, “and I don't intend to.”

“Look,” his father smiled, and Alan could feel his relief, “I said I didn't think you did, I was positive of it, but — you know — right?”

Alan nodded.

“Good.” He stood up. “Well, you sleep well.”

Alan looked at the door as he closed it. And thought with a silent cry: Oh Dad! Oh Daddy!

Indeed, not only was he never to smoke pot, he never drank alcohol until he was in his twenties, and then barely at all. But this had nothing to do with anything his father had said. He was afraid if he got high he might blurt out his crime.

He'd been a good student up until that terrible summer. In fact he was skipped ahead a class from elementary school, which put him in his friend Will Jansen's grade; the day he found out was the most joyous day of his boyhood. But although he always tried hard, his marks fell after that summer. Not that he was ever a bad student, but he hovered just below the excellent ones, where he was sure he actually belonged. And while he fought it, he was still obsessed with sex, though he was afraid of girls. He never went to a dance in high school or even to his senior prom, wriggling out of it when a girl he secretly loved put her leg around his in one of their classes and, leaning sideways toward him, whispered would he take her to it.

He didn't know if this had any part in it but he couldn't shake the fear that he would hurt — kill

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