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A Strong Cup of Coffee

Until I was eight or nine, my father was everything I wanted to be. A picture of him starkly rigid and composed in his dress uniform always graced the mantle and dusting it for my mom was considered a privilege. When he was away on dangerous duty, we'd kneel before it like a shrine, praying for his safe return. Yet as a high school senior, those respectful childhood days seemed like another country, another time.

It's not that I wasn't used to the aftertaste of yet another conflict with my dad. I was haunted by the fact that this one had resulted, however accidentally, in bloodshed. I was thinking slowly, it's true, but I would have been surprised even if the crown of my head hadn't been throbbing with six stitches and an itching bandage. Preoccupied, just digesting the strange events of the night before, I'd been silent and aching amidst the chatter of my friends. That's why my eyes went doubly wide as Mickey McNeil reached into his pants, extracting a plastic baggie, aromatic despite the tightly-rolled seal, lushly thick with verdant marijuana buds. He dropped it on the old tin-stamped kitchen tabletop. As it landed with a surprisingly heavy plop, Mickey and Hector trading gleeful looks at my obvious discomfort, Mickey dryly said, "Success, Dad."

My only preparation for this astonishing sight had been when we'd piled out of the car and Hector placed a restraining hand on my shoulder, his eyebrows arching suggestively as he spoke, the pleasure of anticipation flooding his voice.

"Hey, Thomas...you won't *believe* how cool his folks are."

I could still see the knowing smile he'd traded with Mickey, yet I stood slack-jawed, staring at Mickey's parents sharing coffee in the sunny breakfast nook; two plain-faced, middle-aged people grinning with another pleasure I knew well; they'd just scored.

Mickey's dad, a short man whose face was all seams and creases, offered a firm handshake that would have tested even my father's iron grip. But where Dad's hand conveyed a challenge, Ray's simply emanated confidence.

"Hi. Ray McNeil. Glad to meet you." He unrolled the baggie and inhaled deeply, smiling at my ill-concealed astonishment, inviting us to sit down and smoke one as if it was the most natural thing we'd do all day. In marked contrast to my dad, Ray McNeil broadcast gentleness; an impression enhanced by the warm morning glow in the yellow kitchen. His surprisingly deep voice was patiently indulgent, his gray eyes friendly and encouraging.

"You'll have to excuse Mickey. He loves to shock his friends like that. We're not drug addicts or mafioso here, we just don't believe in telling our kids to do what we say, not what we do." He gestured to the slightly plump, pleasant-faced woman next to him.

"This is my wife, Jane."

Her voice was melodic and inviting. "Always glad to meet friends of Mickey. Can I

get you boys some coffee? Around here, the slogan is that there's nothing like a good cup of coffee."

Unlike the walls in Mickey's house, lined by expensively-framed cheap prints of French Impressionists, our living and dining rooms were dominated by rich oils depicting famous American battles in all their pathos and glory. The Monitor and the Merrimack blazing away, The Battle of the Bulge, the flag raising at Guadalcanal - these all fought for your attention, while Thomas Senior's study was dotted with smaller windows affording more piercing views into worlds in turmoil. Dozens of framed black and white photos clustered on the walls. Dad was always the dominating, heavily-armed man among a grimy group of them, lined up with their backs to airplanes, mountain cliffs, shell-ravaged masonry or tropical jungles. The one shadowy, common element in all their grim-smiling visages was the indefinable sense of camaraderie.

In that same dark-paneled man's room, visitors would see and always comment on a framed, but still yellowing newsprint photograph of Thomas Senior, as fresh-faced as I am, arcing a jump shot into some distant hoop. Even though the target's outside the frame, it's plain through the set of his body and the keen focus of his eye that he's going to sink it, even decades later. A baseball with eight scrawled signatures across its pebbled, grass-stained surface rested in a cup on his desk, companion to the football mounted on a wallrack cleverly designed to give the impression that the ball's spiraling down in flight. A small brass plaque underneath read, "To Tom Holt - Game Ball - Purdue/Army 1949".

That room and all the things in it had fascinated me as a child. I'd played contentedly in there for hours, strategically arranging my army of plastic soldiers across a massive scarlet oriental rug, always referring to the one that represented me as "Major Holt". That was fine for a six year-old. But when I failed to outgrow my small stature and even he couldn't deny I'd inherited not only my mother's placid nature but her love of books and solitude, we'd passed the remaining years of my adolescence and beyond like two conflicting co-workers forced to share the same confining cubicle, each always wondering why the other couldn't be more like they were.

Still overwhelmed by the casual, easy warmth of the McNeil's, I nodded dumbly as Jane rose to grab heavy ivory mugs, of the kind favored by chrome-fronted diners of the Fifties. Images of bright chrome trim, checkered tile floors and baby jukeboxes in all the booths gleamed briefly in my mind. Jane's every move was efficient, reminding me of my father's staff at the base; not a wasted motion. Ray lit a cigarette, snapping his dully gleaming silver Zippo lighter with a smoother flourish than my old man; Thomas Senior, as Mom always called him, with the word 'senior' audibly capitalized. Even without last night's conflict painfully pulsing in memory, I'm reminded of my dad often, for there are many places in this city where he was in his element, many men in the world who would have made him the son he wanted.

The acrid cut of Ray McNeil's cigarette smoke, blended with the rich scent of the joint Mickey had just fired up brought me back to the present as Ray continued his marijuana story, his voice warm with smoke and memory.

"My brother and I were raised on a Nebraska farm where this stuff grew wild and our old man let it grow, feeding the seeds to the chickens. Hell, you kids think you're the first ones to smoke this stuff since the beatniks but Gerald and I were rolling joints when Jack Kerouac was but a gleam in his mother's eye."

He was interrupted by a dangerously sharp slam of the screen door, leant even greater urgency by the staccato slap of footsteps down the hallway. Ray was out of his chair a moment before a younger copy of Mickey with redder cheeks and a shorter, whiter cap of blonde hair came sliding into the room. The directness in Ray's voice froze the youth in his tracks, made him unconsciously stand up straight.

"What's wrong, Billy?"

"It's Frank, Dad. Eddie Nolan's mom was bringing us back from swimming and we saw Frank, Stevie and Marco skipping down the sidewalk holding hands."

"What're you saying? Are they drunk?"

"No...I think they're something besides drunk..." Ray fixed the boy with a paternal stare that would have wilted the staunchest young heart.

"C'mon, Billy. You know more than you're telling."

"Well...I heard Frank on the phone with Stevie before he left this morning. He said he'd gotten ahold of some purple barrels last night."

"So they're stoned, huh?" Ray looked at the kitchen clock, a black Felix the Cat with a clock face in his belly, tail ticking back and forth. Ray McNeil spoke softly. "LSD before lunchtime..."

"Boy, if you could have seen them, Dad! They were more than stoned, man! More than stoned!" Billy abruptly bit back his words, suddenly guilty at his own enthusiasm. Ray turned around, speaking matter-of-factly to Jane.

"Just when we were talking about what could go wrong next. And Gerry thinks he's got problems with his kids. At least they're just smoking pot. This new stuff scares me." A wistful smile creased his face. "Makes me long for the days when Mickey and Frank's world was either baseball or helping me work on the Chevy."

Ray's thoughtful, melancholy words faintly evoked the scent of tanned leather, and a memory of helping my mom clean the basement for the Salvation Army. I'd unwittingly opened a closet that had remained closed since we'd moved into the house the year before, only to be submerged in a cascade of sporting equipment. Aromatic baseball gloves thudded dully at my feet. Two bats with the legend "Louisville Slugger" burned into them, freshly smelling of pine tar, narrowly missed my head and I struggled to stand my ground as hardballs, softballs, tennis balls, golf balls and more tapped my shins and shoes. Everything was brand new. The woodgrain of the bats was unmarred, the balls unscuffed and clean. I knew there had been a tremendous noise but couldn't realize how much from standing in the center as it unfolded. The basement door flew open and Mother had called down, "Thomas?.....are you okay?" followed by my father's deep, commanding voice.

"What the hell's going on down there? You didn't tip over those footlockers did you?"

Like all parents, they hadn't waited for an answer but came on down the steps to see me amidst the pile that shouted of exercise and sweat and competition even after so many inactive, imprisoned years. Mother told me later that I'd turned to stare back at them, my mouth slightly open, my eyes filled with quiet wonder.

She started to laugh and his face clouded over. Silently, he'd turned and trudged back upstairs. I'll never forget the tender glance she cast at his retreating back or the way she waited a long moment until he was gone to look at my curious face, and in a hushed voice like people use in churches, banks or at funerals, she said, "He bought those things the day you were born and has moved them from closet to closet every time we've been transferred."

Ray had inadvertently shaken loose another memory too, heavy with the dark pungency of stale grease and freshly changed oil. I was watching Thomas Senior rebuild an engine in a stuffy, baking garage on post that stank of rubber, diesel and sweat. He'd explained the function of the pistons and the crankshaft as he'd extracted them like a strong, filthy surgeon birthing a mechanical child. He told me their use as energy transference systems was as old as Leonardo Da Vinci. I remember how quickly he'd turned away when I looked at him uncomprehendingly.

I was supposed to be helping and learning, but was clumsy with the tools, either handing him an Allen wrench when he wanted a crescent or taking too long to read the little size fractions etched into the sides of the round sockets. The smell made me slightly sick to my stomach and when he'd disconsolately freed me before the end of the

day, I'd hidden my glee by staring at my tennis shoes until he finally said, "Well? Go on, go play or back to the house if you want."

Walking away, I'd looked over my shoulder and he was just standing there, muscled chest and arms gleaming with perspiration and even from twenty feet away I could feel something like pity in his gaze. Eighteen years old now and I still get a milder version of that look from clerks in hardware stores or auto parts places, feel as if they know at a glance that I'm a fish out of water.

Which is exactly what Ray's boy Billy resembled, smelling faintly of chlorine, his hair slicked back on his head like an otter, nervously shuffling from one foot to the other as his father thoughtfully questioned him.

"Okay...How far away were they?" Billy's voice cracked as he replied, and despite the apparent seriousness of the moment, a small, quick smile passed across Jane's face.

"They were at the corner of Federal and Decatur. It looked like they were heading here. I would have missed them, but Mrs. Nolan said, 'Isn't that your brother, William?' She always calls me 'William'. But her voice was so mean it scared me and I turned around so I could watch them out the back window and that's when I knew for sure they weren't drunk. They were still on Federal when we turned the corner. I figured they're coming here 'cause they would have turned off on Decatur if they were going to Stevie or Marco's."

"Alright. I guess we better get them off the street before they make even bigger fools of themselves. Let's go, Mickey."

Ray looked at me and Hector. "How 'bout you two? Do you know Frank? He looks just like Mickey but a couple years younger with about a foot and a half more hair. Billy, you stay here with your mother." Jane stood up, the bright chrome percolator in her hand.

"Should I start a fresh pot, Ray?" He turned around, a sad smile deepening the lines on his face.

"This isn't like a drunk, Jane. It's a powerful chemical. The only sobering thing for this is time. I just hope we find them before they get into real trouble. Let's go, boys."

We'd only reached the front porch when three voices mingling in a painfully out-of-tune rendition of "Lucy In The Sky With Diamonds" reached our ears and the three teenagers rounded the corner, still skipping, still holding hands. I recognized Frank and one of the others, even though they were a grade behind us. A matched pair of old Italian women faced each other on the front porch next door, talking while they worked needlepoint in silver rings. Both glanced up, then looked again for much longer, before pointedly averting their eyes, thin-lipped and radiating disapproval. As we watched the three boys skipping with fingers locked, voices raggedly raised, all with wild, untamed hair to their shoulders, Ray whispered to Mickey, "Maybe Mrs. Pastore'll mistake this for alcohol, though imagine what else she must be thinking."

The giddy trio lightly tripped up the intermittently grassy slope of the front lawn.

"Hey, Frank." Ray spoke in a placid voice. His son advanced a couple of steps towards the front porch, the other two leaning uncertainly against each other. They all

wore permanent, blissful grins like badges. The surprise I expected to see on Frank's face when he noticed his father on the porch was replaced by a glazed, but pleased recognition.

"Greetings, oh great white father." He bowed low dramatically, a supplicant to royalty. Frank paused then, suddenly and totally distracted like a cat by the lightly aimless fluttering of a butterfly, but one that we couldn't see.

"Oh wow! Look at that, you guys!"

Then it was as if our world vanished from around them, all three watching the same spot in mid-air intently, too intently. Stevie spoke to no one in particular.

"Man, look at those colors!"

"Colors? Check out those trails, man!" Frank replied, waving his hand through the invisible spot, and the trio burst into a fit of giggles. Mrs. Pastore and her companion silently retreated into the house. The door slammed shut and an instant later, her living room curtains pulled apart ever so slightly. Ray spoke authoritatively but with persuasive promise.

"Well, guys...why don't you c'mon in. I've got something to share with you."

He turned and with a confident wink at us, led the way inside. The three boys came up the stairs in single file, their eyes constantly roaming, finding wonder in everything; the cracked paint of the porch swing that Stevie ran his fingers gently over, the scuffed concrete stairs with Marco carefully stepping outside the well-worn path in the paint, the shimmering spider web up in the corner that Frank stopped to admire until his

brother gently grasped his shoulders, nudging him across the threshold. Hector and I followed, letting the screen door close softly behind us.

Once inside, the trio filled the room with an anxious, alive energy as if Ray had just let loose a herd of young puppies. Stevie and Marco intermittently struggled to display a distant version of quiet respect and politeness around parents. Jane and Billy had moved into the living room and three darkly brimming mugs steamed aromatically on the low coffee table. The boys stood awkwardly in the doorway, looking longingly towards the open hall door and the basement stairs, whispering to each other, suppressing laughter.

Frank, naturally comfortable in the familiar living room, stood smiling at his mother who shook her head and took a sip of what we would later come to call her 'perpetually-full' cup of coffee. Young Bill sat next to her, grinning the grin of the younger child savoring an older sibling's rough crossing. Ray spoke to him without looking in his direction.

"Go dry your hair Bill, and get out of those wet trunks."

"Aw, Dad." He replied, full of pleading but making no effort to push it further. He slumped out of the room, tossing an I-told-you-so look towards his mom. Ray's voice was even, patient, confiding.

"Alright, boys. I know you're tripping and I'm not mad, I just want you to concentrate on listening to me for a second...Now. You know we've always said if you want to smoke pot, do it here. Same goes for what you're doing now. I don't want you

on the street like this. Mrs. Pastore probably thinks you three have some kind of disgusting menage a' trois going on. God knows what would have happened if the police had seen you."

The boys went into fits of laughter at the french phrase but grew a little more serious, if only for a fleeting moment, at the mention of police. Ray resumed in the same warm, non-judgmental voice.

"Not to mention that you're dealing with more of an unknown than when you just smoke a joint. At least here, you're safe and there's no surprises. Well, lecture's over. We'll talk some more later. Sit down, boys. We don't bite, honest. Stevie, Marco, as many meals and evenings as you've shared here...don't let my little speech make you uncomfortable. Just the opposite. I've got something here I think you'll all enjoy."

He turned to the shelves behind him, cluttered with books and records while they took seats; Frank next to his mother, the other two on the couch sectional that served as a divider between the living and dining rooms. Frank, still wearing the silly grin that had been plastered on his face when they came up the lawn, stared at his mother, and Jane smiled back comfortingly, belying the worry in her eyes.

She carefully asked, "How are you feeling, Frank?"

To take the edge from her question, I smiled at him in camaraderie.

"Really flying, eh Frank?" His eyes went from mine to his mother's as he replied excitedly.

"I'll say! This stuff is the best. Real smooth and clean. You just feel on top of the

world, Mom. I scored some barrels of it last night at the concert and man!" He stopped then, suddenly aware even through the drug who he was talking to about the relative merits and qualities of hallucinogens. He bit it off and looked at Jane soberly. "Hey, Mom. Are you mad at me?" She smiled in spite of herself.

"A lot of good that would do me right now, you little bozo." I could tell it was one of those terms of endearment all their kids had probably heard over the years when they got carried away, too personal or too wild. I could also tell this was something they'd talk about later. The clown word launched the other two boys into gales of laughter.

Stevie and Marco's laughter was infectious though, and Jane broke out into a broad grin, saying "Well, I didn't think it was that funny."

Hector replied, "Right now all you'd have to say is 'The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain' and..." He was interrupted by all three teenagers uproariously mirthful, Frank slapping his knee.

"That's good, Hector! The rain in Spain falls mainly on..." They all dissolved into wild hilarity at the jaded rhyme again, Stevie and Marco leaning against each other roaring almost hysterically, tears of laughter streaming down their faces. Jane's face flooded with uneasiness and Ray quickly stood up from the shelving with two record albums in his hand. Moving subtly so their jackets couldn't be read, he walked over to the old console stereo, lifted the lid and slipped one of the discs onto the tall chrome spike with a slight click.

"Alright. Now we're going to play a little game. I want you three to lie down on the

floor here." He indicated the space directly in front of the stereo.

The boys looked at each other and the novelty of the suggestion was particularly appealing in their current state of mind. It was almost a race and then they were lying on the floor, bumping and tickling each other. Frank looked up at the ceiling.

"Have you ever noticed the crazy pattern our ceiling has? Wow! And the way it moves..."

The rest of us looked up but only saw the flowing, jagged pattern left by some nameless and long-distant laborer's trowel. The other boys rolled over on their backs and for a silent moment all three of them lay as if watching clouds or a summer storm move in. Ray held the stereo arm so he could selectively place the needle down.

"Alright, now. Close your eyes, boys. I want you to listen carefully and tell me not what you hear, but what you *see*."

He shot a confident smile at us, assurance in his bright eyes and seamed face. Jane visibly relaxed. Ray gently lay the needle down, turning the volume knob way up. Far off in the distance, the whuffling of a train grew louder and larger. Even without the aid of LSD, it was easy to see an old iron horse chuffing out clouds of smoke as it rounded a bend at speed or determinedly crested a steep grade on some narrow-gauge track of the mind. A visible wave of excitement washed through the boys. They squinched their eyes shut even more tightly, their arms and legs quivering in barely repressed excitement. The sound grew progressively louder until it was almost deafening. Stevie and Marco rolled out of it's imagined path at the same moment with screams of glee.

Frank lay stiff as a board, then finally could stand it no more and joined them. Ray lifted the needle from the record. The boys were laughing wildly, looking at each other with their eyes dilated and feverish.

"Alright. We all know what that was, right? C'mon, get back down there and we'll do another one."

Ray's voice conveyed playful patience. The excited trio, energy focused now, leapt to their positions and closed their eyes like children making a wish before blowing out all the candles. This time, the sound had little prelude. Instantly, a jumbo jet shrieked in for a landing in the living room. Even Jane laughed as the boys tensed up, enduring it as long as possible before they finally sat up when the engines whined past, seemingly just a few feet above our heads. This time Ray didn't even have to speak. They lay back down on the floor as one, eyes closed, legs and arms jerking in anticipation. He waited a long moment.

"C'mon, Dad! Do another one! Do another one!"

Ray worked his way through the record then, moving from the boom and crackle of a thunderstorm to race cars at Le Mans growling out tough gear changes to the sounds of some great cavalry thundering across a vast, dust-choked plain. Jane quietly got up and tip-toed around the boys. She brought Ray a cup of coffee, gave him a hug and sat back down. Mickey was rolling a joint with a big grin on his face. Hector and I were unable to take our eyes from Ray McNeil. He sat so calmly, forceful in his silence, exuding a quiet sense of control that was the focus of the room. When he'd exhausted

the sound effects, Ray put on Beethoven's Sixth and waved us all into the kitchen. Not a sound came from the living room but the lush chords and when the record ended, we heard the click of the stereo arm. I looked in to see Frank flip the record over, hit the reject button and hurriedly lay back down besides his companions. Ray smiled with great satisfaction and we all toasted him, our cups dully clinking in a way that made us laugh.

I was spinning, caught up in a swift current of admiration for Mickey's dad, sporadically dragged down by the undertow of envy's powerful tug. I touched my bandage gingerly, thinking about the grim toast I'd shared with my parents the night before. We'd gone out to dinner to celebrate the arrival of two pieces of mail; my old man's most recent commission, though my Mom was mostly celebrating that she wouldn't have to be pulling up stakes again, and my scholarship confirmation to college.

This last was a sore point. Thomas Senior had always maintained the only way this family would ever manage college for me was if I signed up for ROTC and then straight into the service out of high school. My stubborn struggle to reach that goal anyway would have been worth celebration. Yet he and I both knew that I'd worked so hard not so much to get an education, but to prove him wrong.

The old man had been quiet and reserved all through the meal, which was nothing new, but there was an element of distance and defined borders I'd never felt before, and when we raised our glasses in toast, I noticed that he only clinked with my Mom. On

the way home, he was driving in that competent, confident style he had; one hand on the wheel of the big Cadillac, the other crooked on the door, the recent grey tips in his crewcut catching the light of passing cars, neon signs and traffic lights. I sprawled in the back, leaning against the door with my legs stretched out across the wide expanse of the back seat. Mother and I were talking about dishes and furniture she would give me and I was conscious of increased speed as he wound around the curved entrance ramp to the highway. It was twilight and cars were just turning on their headlights.

My weight pressed harder against the door and I realized that it wasn't closed tightly. I hadn't even lifted away from the dull, not uncomfortable bulge of the padded arm in the small of my back when there was a flash in the windshield. My vision transformed into the slow motion of accidents at freeway speed. A car had jumped the median, was heading directly for us.

There was so much to see in that instant; the inexpertly painted flames crawling across the fenders, the prancing chrome icon of a wild horse forever frozen in the grille, the letters spelling out "FORD" on the hood, the red and white of a beer can bouncing across their dashboard beneath the wide eyes and open, soundless mouths of two bearded faces. The pomade on their hair caught the light. I heard Mother scream. My father let out a startled grunt as if he'd been punched in the belly and then his hands were moving the great steering wheel with precision and I grew faint as I felt us accelerating. The oncoming car seemed to be pushed from our path in all contradiction to the intense, agonizing force I felt pulling, pulling us out of the way. The Ford

vanished as in a dream. Veins stood out in relief on Dad's neck and I could see the tendons in his wrists and hands as he fought the wheel and the power steering. We went into a spin and the world merged around us into formless flashes, blotches of oddly bright color. At that moment my door opened with a sickening click and I felt myself flung towards the yawning opening. I was on my back, arms outstretched like bird wings and my fingertips just managed to lock on the inside edges of the door frame. I raised my head to see Mother wide-eyed and speechless, reaching towards me helplessly against the imprisoning strap of her seat belt. The loose buckle of my own seatbelt dug painfully into my back and in the midst of that great tornado, time stopped for me to feel a great sense of irony.

My neck was near snapping and I let it fall backwards. The screaming of the tires was horrible and inches away. When I turned my head even slightly to the side I could feel the graveled pavement swishing past my cheek. My fingers ached, slipped a sixteenth of an inch. Then a vise locked onto my leg, holding me in the car. I wanted to close my eyes but a deeper part of me forced them open, turned my head in the direction of the spin. Something snapped in my leg and as if that was a signal, the car slung around into the wide dirt median. Clouds of dust choked me and stung my eyes. I blinked and in that briefest of instants, a rock had materialized on the ground, directly in my path. Weeks later in the middle of brushing my teeth I suddenly saw that stone in my mind and realized it had been shaped like the Rock of Gibraltar. At that moment I only knew I had to raise my head faster than I thought was possible, was surprised

when I made it, was even more surprised then, when I heard a sickening rent of hair and felt a hot wire dart across the back of my scalp. As if that brief contact had been all that was necessary, the spin let us go and we came to an abrupt halt. I could hear breathing, didn't know if it was mine, mother's or the old man's. The hot engine ticked quietly as if we'd just parked in the driveway at home.

I touched the back of my head and dully stared at the rich bright coating of blood on my hand. Then the vroom of uncaring traffic rushed back in, sirens in the distance sounded and I realized my leg was still painfully trapped against whatever it was that had saved me.

I sat up, conscious of how bright the chrome strip of the doorjamb was and saw the old man's hand rigid and white, locked onto my shin just above the ankle. My gaze traced upwards along his right arm where it reached over the backseat, twisting in an impossible way and I knew what I'd felt wasn't something in my leg snapping, but his arm coming out of the socket.

"Help me." I heard him calmly order my mother. "I can't let go of him." The bright snick of her seatbelt releasing sounded, and I watched her hair fall forwards as she leaned over the seat and one by one, unclenched his fingers from my leg. He sighed when the last one came free and moaned, pulling the arm slowly back over the seat. Mother looked at me, saw the blood on my hand and took a fast, shocked breath. I felt faint, knew I was going to fall backwards but was helpless to do anything about it. I don't remember tumbling out the door.

The next thing I knew, I was being cradled like a feather in a wide, deep lap. His lap. His good hand was pressed against the back of my head too hard, as if his strength could staunch the flow of blood or press the very life back into me. The other arm lay across my chest, a dead weight pressing me to him. My father was talking and sobbing and I could feel his barrel chest shaking against my cheek. His voice was gravelly and rough, like I'd never heard it before.

"You hang on boy, you hang on, goddam it! I'm not going to lose you here, not this way...oh, Christ."

I sensed my mother near, felt him shift position as she hugged us both. I wanted to open my eyes, to say something, to tell them I felt no pain, felt great actually, but nothing worked. The three of us took on the stony quality of statuary and I didn't have to open my eyes to see that though we were in the center of the city, we were really at the edge of the world.

"Thomas, Thomas....." He was moaning and it was the first time I'd ever heard him admit pain into his voice, his world. I sensed him look at her and knew from her tone of voice that his eyes were sad and desperate.

"I never wanted it like this. I just wanted him to be strong. I just wanted him to know."

"To know what, honey?" Mother prompted, her voice serene and soft. He paused before answering and as he did I heard a siren grow large and suffocate, followed by doors slamming and footfalls pounding across the dirt. The last thing I heard before I

woke up in the emergency room was Thomas Senior murmuring, "To know the world's full of blind people and fools."

Just then the conversation in Jane McNeil's kitchen penetrated my reverie. Frank and his pals were thanking Ray over and over for the records. Enthusiasm and love bubbled in Frank's voice as he said, "As usual, Dad...you know just what to do."

Ray speared us all with a pointed glance as he spoke, raising an index finger in emphasis.

"Today's lesson was just what I'm always trying to teach you youngsters: No matter if you're in a town of five thousand or a million, the percentage of fools and idiots is always the same. You have the choice to be as blind as the rest of them...or not."

I felt myself go pale with surprise, hearing Thomas Senior's lamenting words on the tongue of this man I'd thought so much wiser. I felt something shift inside of me, like a switch had been flicked or a floodgate opened, deciding that when I got home, I'd matter-of-factly inform my dad I'd be staying in tonight. I gingerly touched my bandage again, thinking any pain would be worth the rare look of surprise *that* would create on his face. A look that would surely be heightened when I asked him about the men in those photographs, who have always clearly, even in my most indignant anger, been anything but blind or fools.