

Chapter One

A Mile in Kenny's Shoes



On the fly

In dreams Kenny Hopewell always knew where he was, and where he was supposed to be. That's why the first two times his sister Aurelia called up the stairs to wake him he had trouble shaking off the sleep. The third time he was struggling to figure out where he was. After a few moments he remembered he was in his own room. As far as he could tell.

He sat up with a start, a fleeting memory fragment that he had something to do, then settled back in bed a while studying the room, his feet hanging off the end of the mattress. The ceiling was dull white. Shadow tails like anti-comets stretched out from flecks of sand paint in the muted morning light.

He turned on his side toward warm sunlight splayed across the top of his dresser. For early May it was very warm, past expectation. Not that Kenny would know that this spring was much milder than normal. If you asked him, he would say it was summer already.

Four and a half steps from the bed to the dresser, underwear in the top drawer on the right, socks on the left. This was the one he was keeping the baby snakes in, the ones he'd found two days ago. Shirts next drawer down, pants below them. Seven steps to the door of the closet, comic books on the bottom shelf. Around the corner, four steps to the hallway door, then downstairs to the right into the kitchen.

Kenny gobbled down three bowls of Sunny Square Frosted Flakes and four pieces of toasted white bread before saying a word.

“Was I s’posed to go someplace today?” he asked Aurelia.

“You said Cough wanted to talk to you Friday,” Aurelia said, as she wiped crumbs from the table.

“What day is it?”

“Friday.”

“Ohh, man.” Kenny bounced up from his chair and ran out the front door.

“Kenny, check your fly!” Kenny paused on the top step of the porch, tugged the fabric of his pants out past the bulge of his belly to get a good look at the zipper. It was closed, mostly.

He shook his head, disgusted.

He was on a mission, and she wasn’t taking him seriously. Just because he hadn’t been able to hold a job, even trying hard. He didn’t get her.

“Criminy, ’Relia. Cough don’t care nothin’ about my fly, we got business.”

He made it by a quarter to eight, fifteen minutes late, but found Cough still sitting on the peeling plank bench on the mill side of the school, combing his fingers through his oiled black hair. The crowd of workers going into the mill was getting thick.

“You’re late, Kenny. What’s the matter?”

“Aurelia took too long for breakfast, Cough. Wasn’t my fault,” Kenny said, looking down at his sneakers.

“That’s okay, Bud. No harm done. I just wasn’t sure you were goin’ to show, and this is important. You know that, right, Kenny?” He slid his hands behind his knees to steady them, like he’d had to do the last couple of years.

“Yes, sir,” Kenny said solemnly. He had heard it in his father’s friend’s voice yesterday afternoon, when Cough said he needed him. This was no regular errand.

“Listen, Kenny, my shift’s startin’ pretty quick. Remember your cousin we talked about before? And the message about the mill? Well, get it to him, pronto. We need help in a hurry.” Then Cough glanced nervously in the direction of the mill gate, “And don’t tell nobody what you’re doin’. It’ll likely only screw things up.”

Kenny made a zipper motion across his lips.

“You know Janie Nicmond, right? Got a little boy Billy?”

“Yeah.” Kenny remembered a skinny, freckled kid who wouldn’t eat the cereal dust when Aurelia baby-sat him.

“Okay. Janie is waiting to take you to the college. Let me tell you how to get to her house, okay?”

Kenny nodded calmly, as if he was used to getting directions to go to new places, as if he went on missions all the time.

“You’ve gotta go across the bridge,” Cough began. “Do you think you can find your way to the bridge?”

Kenny’s head swam with images of streets, alleys, and bridges. He tried to listen to every word Cough was saying, but was distracted by the falling water that ran the paper mill. He wiped his right palm against his pants. Heat flushed his cheeks and forehead.

Cough grimaced.

Kenny got quieter, trying to follow the details. He heard Lark and Bridge and Right and Left and Bud’s Hardware. Like always, the sequence was fluid; the directional points shifted and danced.

Cough asked again if he understood.

Kenny nodded yes, thinking the question was whether he had been paying attention.

Cough glanced over his shoulder at Horace, the tour boss, who was smirking as he pushed the gate slowly toward where it would lock him out.

“Ya know where you’re goin’?”

“Yeah,” Kenny said. He was supposed to find Janie’s house.

“Don’t tell no one what you’re doin’. Not even Aurelia. It’ll spoil it,” Cough hissed, then hurried across the street.

“Okay.”

Kenny watched the mill gate swallow his dead father’s best friend. He choked down the lump in his throat, tugged up again on his zipper, and began.



John Harlan at work

Harlan could not stop himself from looking. She was about forty-five, yet seemed older, the corners of her mouth pulled downward by the weight of her life.

Carmen's paper was really bad, a few good passages tossed into word salad, full of grammatical and spelling errors, no thesis. It looked like she was still using a typewriter, with the ribbon worn down to nothing, the print was so light. Harlan suspected she had lifted much of it directly from one or two encyclopedias and a technical journal. All the telltale signs were there—awkward transitions, passages with syntax problems, some vocabulary so specialized and sophisticated that even Harlan was not sure what it meant.

She didn't belong in college. Not this one, nor a better one, nor a community college, nor an ag & tech. She just didn't have it. She was going to find her way to some gas-mart job, or probably two clerk jobs, together about fifty hours a week with no health insurance: stuck at minimum wage.

It was more than he could bear to do, telling her she was in over her head. The only thing in his power was to give her another chance, talk her through the plagiarism so she could get a D in his class. Then she'd go back to plagiarizing. Let someone else be the one to say she couldn't cut it.

And Bobo back there, the lacrosse player from Long Island. If there were standards any more, he'd have a negative grade-point average. But he would be in school as long as he wanted; maybe not this one, but somewhere, because his old man would pay for it.

Bobo looked up and stared back at Harlan, his bloodshot eyes straining to focus. Harlan looked away. Too much eye contact might be trouble.

He couldn't afford that on his student evaluations.



On a lark

Straight up River Street a block and a half to the intersection with Main. Left past the bowling alley and across the bridge, first right onto Lark. Not quite three blocks down on the north side of the street. Janie's place was next to Bud's Hardware and Lumber. The directions were that simple.

Kenny was fine walking up River Street, remembered Bridge well enough to get himself across the river, then turned slowly on the southwestern corner of Main and Lark, clockwise and counterclock-

wise, looking for a clue. He cycled Cough's words through his mind, recalling Lark, one Left and one Right.

Had he taken a left or a right already?

Bud's son Carly drove up Main with the delivery truck and took a left onto Lark, the *Bud's Hardware and Lumber* lettering on the driver's door catching Kenny's eye and pulling him in pursuit.

By the time Janie Nicmond gave up on waiting and left for college, Kenny was five and a half blocks west on Lark, nearly in tears from losing sight of the delivery truck, having completely forgotten where he was going.



Janie learns significance

"And is that a significant statistical difference?" Dr. Koemover queried, tapping his foot four times before looking up from the floor tiles for a hand in the air. There were none, though most of his customers still seemed to be working on it.

"Ms. Dovinger? Is that a significant statistical difference?" Ariana Dovinger nodded her head three times. The other students watched her carefully to make sure she was nodding yes, and not just caught in her reflexive spasm.

Koemover smiled quickly, his thin upper lip raising evenly. "Very good, Ms. Dovinger. Barely significant. I thought the sampling error might trip you up. Very good." Ariana's head bobbed more rapidly in reply.

The computer lab door opened gently, almost silently. Janie slipped in, trying to get to her seat unnoticed.

Koemover glared, following every step with his eyes. His followers glared, too, Ariana's head bobbing to add emphasis.

"Ms. Nicmond, the other customers and I were discussing whether there was a significant statistical difference in the behavior of Jewish voters in New York State's last two gubernatorial elections. We were all wondering what you thought."

Janie was burning in her seat. First arguing with her mother-in-law about watching her son while she was at work, then waiting so long to give someone she didn't even know a ride to college that it made her late for class. And now this corn-hole. He knew she was

late, she knew she was late, everybody knew. What was the point? If there had been any other eight o'clock classes left that she could use for her distribution requirements when she finally got her Pell grant, she wouldn't even be here.

"Ms. Nicmond?"

She studied him: pinched nose, pinched mouth, pinched eyes, pinched everything. "I don't know, Doctor Koemover."

"Well, how would you find out, Ms. Nicmond?" he asked, as he took the transparency that contained the formula off the overhead projector.

Jennifer Kudrow also was stuck in the class because it had been the only open one that fit her schedule. She was a theater major, not a favorite of any of the faculty directors. She was so bored with college, thinking about either dropping out of school, transferring, or having an affair with a professor. She swiveled in her upholstered computer chair so her back was to Koemover and scratched YES in big letters on her notebook, holding it so Janie could see.

"I guess I would have to have the formula and the data to find out," Janie said.

"Do you have that information?"

"No."

"Would it be helpful for you to have that information?"

"Yes."

"Then I would suggest that unless you are an extremely gifted psychic, you make an effort to get here on time." The Koemover crowd snickered in sync.

"Perhaps you'd like to try guessing, Ms. Nicmond."

Janie started to shake her head, then noticed Jennifer's sign. "Uh, I could try, I guess."

Koemover reddened. "Then let's have it. Is there a statistically significant difference in Jewish voting behavior from 1982 to 1986?"

Janie looked away from Jennifer, toward the bulletin board covered with credit-card application brochures in the back of the room. She'd already seen the cue. "Yes."

"Why, that's wonderful. She guessed correctly, with only a fifty-fifty probability of success. Isn't that amazing, everyone?" Ariana's head bobbed thoughtfully.

"What degree of significance, Ms. Nicmond? By a large margin?"

Jennifer crossed her legs, dropped her notebook flat on her lap. When Janie swiveled her head back in her direction, she saw Jennifer

holding her thumb and forefinger about half an inch apart. Janie rolled her eyes to the ceiling for a few seconds.

“I would say it’s statistically significant by only a very small margin.”

“You’d have to explain your methodology to me, Ms. Nicmond. Perhaps you were listening outside the door before you came in. It doesn’t matter, however, because I do not believe you could reproduce the result with fresh data with any degree of accuracy, could you?”

She shook her head. “Probably not.”

Koemover harrumphed and set a new transparency on the overhead. Janie looked both ways, then mouthed a “thank you” to Jennifer. Jennifer gave her a bored smile.



Cough at someone’s mill

Cough was in the break room with the other tenders, temporarily freed from their paper machine, having a cigarette, listening to the latest story about who was buying out the mill, worrying about Kenny.

He picked at the ashes trapped in the gummy gray surface of the table with his left thumb, the one not split so badly the quick had never healed.

“I tell ya, it’s Germans,” Red Winston, the fourth hand, was saying.

“Shit, yeah,” Lyle Lester, the back tender, weighed in. “They’re buyin’ up everything. Them and the Air’bs.”

Cough wished there were a way to find out if Kenny had made it to Janie’s. But she was at college, and he couldn’t see calling Aurelia. All she could say was whether Kenny was home. If he wasn’t, it still didn’t mean he’d made it.

“How d’ya know it ain’t the Air’bs?” Charlie Ayles asked.

Lyle smiled a disgusted, knowing smile. “That’s why yer a fifth hand, Charlie. Whadda they know ’bout makin’ paper? They ain’t even got no trees in them countries.” He tipped his head back and drained the last of his Coke.

“They don’t need to know nothin’ if they got the money,” Charlie insisted.

Red nodded forlornly. “Horace knows, I’ll betcha, but he ain’t tellin’.”

Charlie, Red, and Lyle all craned to look at Horace through the small window to the shop floor.

Lyle dented his Coke can inside and out. “Yeah, he looks pretty smug lately. You know he’s cut in.”

Red snorted. “Course he’s cut in. Ain’t nothin’ they could ask him to do he wouldn’t do. Give ‘em his left nut, he would, an’ say thanks for givin’ me the opportunity to contribute. Right, Cough?”

“Um, yeah,” he answered. “You guys got it all figured. It’s the Germans.”

“Where you been, Cough,” Charlie laughed. “We’re onto Horace now.”

“No place. Just thinkin’.” He pressed tobacco-stained fingers on the table. Cough was uneasy talking any more. He was wishing he could have trusted Aurelia and Janie enough to tell them about his plan. Then he wouldn’t have to worry about Kenny.

He thought about that for another minute before deciding he’d done the best he could.

It wasn’t his fault Aurelia and Janie were women. No one could help that.



Zola Brooks, code-cracker

Everyone in the politics department was distracted by Zola’s impending marriage. She had always been devoted to her job—working overtime without pay, taking lunch at her desk, never complaining about last-minute typing, being courteous even when the faculty seemed to have forgotten how. Now a fear was spreading that she might stop being so accommodating. President McAdam was especially afraid, because lately he had been bringing certain papers across the Commons for her to type, away from the surveillance of the vice president of administration, Herman Wispen.

Once she’s married she might not be as loyal to the college as to her husband, or some other stupid thing, McAdam fretted. But still he slid the papers between pages of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, folded and tucked it under his elbow, and strolled as unselfconsciously as he could past Ms. Axe’s desk and Wispen’s office door, then on over to the Research Center. Once safely ensconced in the MEN FACULTY bathroom, he assembled the papers in an interoffice mailer.

“How are you doing, Ms. Brooks?” he asked, minutes later.

“Afternoon, Dr. McAdam,” she replied. “I’ve got this ready. Hope they’re all right.”

“Uh, yes, I’m sure they are, Zola. Sure they are. I have something else for you that needs to go out today.”

“Today?”

“Yes, I’m sure it’ll be okay. Ms. Axe, you know, is very busy.” He stopped surveying the dots on the ceiling tiles to focus grimly into Zola’s eyes. “Very important, very busy. Sure it will be fine.”

Zola looked at the four legal pages of scrawling and fought back an urge to glance at the wall clock.

“President McAdam, Harold usually comes by for the mail at about a quarter to four, and I’m afraid I might not have them perfectly ready by then.”

“They won’t be mailed, Zola, not mailed. I’ll pick them up myself, when they’re done. Here till six, at least, you know. Very busy. Just go ahead, get started. Sure it’ll be all right.”

Zola saw Koemover slip behind his office door a few seconds before McAdam retreated past it. She glanced at the clock, 3:16 p.m., and waited for Koemover to emerge and start circling. She was only halfway through the directions for his 150-question exam, not needed until next fall, and she was supposed to leave by 4:30—her usual time—to get to her wedding rehearsal and dinner.

He’ll just have to wait, she thought, shutting down the file for the directions for Koemover’s test. They were long enough to be a test in themselves. No wonder his students were afraid of his methods class. She fished an unmarked computer disk from the back of a drawer behind her copier-toner refills.

“H-U-M-P-T-Y,” she typed in for the password, then O-V-E-R-L-O-R-D at the first password file prompt. She tapped her fingers twice while the computer set up the final invisible prompt.

“W-H-I-T-E-W” she entered before Koemover appeared in her peripheral vision. *Is he close enough to see?*

Koemover sensed he had been detected, aborted the stealth approach. “Hello, Zola,” he tested.

“Hello, Dr. Koemover,” Zola replied, punching the Escape key. Her hope of leaving on time shut down with the file.

“That’s not my test you’re doing, is it?”

Not unless you've started writing on legal pads, in Swahili. “No, it isn't, Dr. Koemover. But I've been working on it. I'll be able to finish it Monday.”

“Monday? But won't you be on your honeymoon?”

“Not yet. I'll be in next week.”

“Oh, well, then, I guess it's okay. It can wait until next week, I guess. Don't you think?”

I think it could wait until Thanksgiving. “Yes, there's plenty of time, Dr. Koemover.” Then she gambled, “There's a high-priority item I need to take care of, right now, if I could.”

“Is it for the president? Dr. McAdam? I saw him at your desk.”

“Ye . . . yes, he was here.” *Should I?* she thought. “Uh, he noticed you weren't at your desk.”

Koemover turned a whiter shade of pale. He darted off to his office.

As she rebooted the file, Zola reflected on potential interruptions. *Earhart? No, not on a Friday afternoon. Guppy? No, I think he's gone, too. Let's see. Harlan? If it's anybody, it'll be Harlan, Last-Minute Man.*

She peered at the legal pages. Even if she could read them, she wouldn't finish before four-thirty.

“Due to the e-x-p . . . What? Due to the e-x-p- of the fram-line . . . What's a framline?”

Harlan opened the door to the office suite, trundling in with an armload of US Foreign Policy essays in white essay booklets. Zola tunneled her vision into the legal pad.

“E-x-p . . . ion. Expression? expiration? expansion? That's got to be it, expansion.” She heard the door to Harlan's office close gently. She might have a chance after all.

“College could o-p-t-a-r-r assistance through a study . . . optarr? What the? college could optarr assistance? Let's see, optar, optic, often, offer. Offer. That's it.”

“Zola?” Harlan interrupted. “Zola, don't let me interrupt, but aren't you supposed to be gone by now? Don't you have a rehearsal or something?”

Zola sighed under her breath. *He's so sweet. But now I've got no chance.* “It's this last thing I have to do, John, but I'm almost finished,” she lied.

“Is there anything I can do?”

Do you know hieroglyphics? “No, you just have a good weekend. You're coming tomorrow, aren't you?”

“Sure, Zola, with bells on. Wouldn’t miss it.”

“Great, see you then.”

“Okay. Don’t sweat that memo, or whatever it is. It’ll have to wait until you get back.”

“I’m almost done, really. Just a sentence or two.”

“Okay, I’ll get out of your hair. See you.”

“Bye. See you tomorrow.” *Oh, well*, she thought. *Nice guy, too bad about all the tenure pressure.*

She looked at the clock, five minutes to four, and at the bottom of the first page of McAdam’s secret memo. *I’ll never make it.*

Harlan stuck his head back in the office. “Zola, there’s no way you can finish that today. Especially with your screen frozen.”

“But the screen’s not . . . See you tomorrow, John?”

Harlan nodded and turned to leave as she picked up the phone receiver.

“Fred? This is Zola . . . Yes, I know. I was supposed to be out of here already . . . You’re way ahead of me . . . You sure it wouldn’t hurt anything?” Zola punched the key to save what she had on the file, then shut it down.

“Okay, we’re even now . . . Oh, that’s nothing, I’d do that anyway . . . Thanks, Fred. See you tomorrow? Great. Mm-bye.”

She eased the receiver back onto its base and watched the dummy file empty from her screen. 10-9-8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1. Better leave a message with Axe.

Zola dialed McAdam’s administrative assistant, waiting through nine rings for her to pick up.

“Hello, President McAdam’s office,” Marla breathed into the phone.

“Marla? This is Zola Brooks. Listen, I have an item for Dr. McAdam, but my computer screen just froze up. I’m afraid I won’t be able to finish it today. Could you leave him that message, please?”

A pronounced, agonizing pause was punctuated by three huffing sighs. Finally Zola heard, “I suppose so.” She said “Thanks” quickly and hung up, grabbed her purse and ran out of the office. She couldn’t tell whether the sound of the ringing phone was in her imagination.

Marla huffed three more times, making sure the polish on her nails had jelled before she called McAdam.

“Mis-ter McAdam?” There was a pause, during which Marla snickered to herself. She could almost see McAdam turning red in the face from being called Mister.

“Yes, Ms. Axe?”

“Uh, yeah. Zola Brooks just called. Her computer’s down and she can’t get that thing done today.”

“What?” He was nearly shouting.

“Her computer screen’s frozen, she said.”

“Well, is it?”

“Uh, let me see.” Marla swiveled in her chair, dialed Fred, and got no answer. “Nobody’s at the computer center.”

“Thank you, Ms. Axe.” McAdam replied quietly to cover his panic. At the very least he had to get those papers back in his own hands right away.

Though leaving the office again was sure to tip off Admin VP Wispen that something was up.



Janie, home with Billy

Janie pulled into her driveway ten minutes after her son got off the bus. He was waiting for her, on the porch, sitting on the grimy linoleum playing with a naked armless doll he’d dragged off from a garage sale. She was glad he was at least a little out of sight, better than that time when she’d put a house key on a string around his neck, and his father had taken it, made his own copy, and cleaned her out.

She hated it so bad. She was always afraid. A lot could happen in ten minutes.

“Wha’cha doin’, punkin?”

“Puttin’ my marbles away,” he said, not looking up, blowing his spiky bangs back from his eyes.

“Whaddaya mean, putting your marbles away? You didn’t have them in school with you, did you?”

“No, but, guess what? The marbles go inside Dolly.”

“Let Mommy see, honey, I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Okay, but just a minute,” he said, concentrating, his back still turned toward her. “I’m not done yet.”

Janie unlocked the door, swung her backpack across the threshold, fought the urge to sit down on the floor.

“Billy, Honey, can you bring Dolly inside? Mom’s gotta start supper.”

“I will in a minute, Mom. I’m almost done.” She watched him fumble marbles into the armholes of the doll, his lower lip disappearing under his teeth. His arms were so thin.

“Honey, please, Mom needs you to come inside, right now.”

She couldn’t take the looks from old lady Boyar in the next apartment, or the reproach of the landlord if he spotted Billy alone on the porch. Not again.

Finally he looked up, clutching the marble-filled doll like a prize.

“Here it is. It’s ready now.”

“I see. Can I take it for a minute?”

“Sure, it’s okay.”

She hefted the doll in one hand, taking his elbow in the other to lead him inside.

“Naw, Mommy, Justin’s gonna be outside.”

“I know, Honey, but I want you to stay in. Isn’t there some good show on TV, some cartoon? Wait a minute,” she added with false enthusiasm. “Isn’t Sesame on?”

He frowned and sighed. *Oh, God, she thought. He doesn’t like Sesame Street any more. I know that. What’s wrong with me?*

Billy stood rooted just inside the doorway, waiting for his mother to demonstrate she knew anything about him.

What’s wrong with my kid? Everybody else’s kid is glued to the TV and he wants to play outside. When am I ever gonna catch a break?

Billy’s lower lip puffed out in ever greater measure of pouting.

“Hey, soldier, you did a real good job putting these in here,” Janie started out. Billy shifted his weight on his left foot. “Are you thinking about keeping your marbles in Dolly all the time?”

“Can’t take ’em to school that way,” Billy muttered.

“Uh-huh. That’s right. But you’re not supposed to take them to school anyway. Right?” She cocked her head to one side, the signal that he should let her be the Mommy.

“I remember.”

“Well, of course you do. I knew that. Would you like to help me get supper?”

“Oh all right. I guess so.” After the macaroni elbows were boiled and the tomato sauce was almost warmed up, Billy’s grandmother arrived to watch him while Janie went off to work the second shift.

“Come give Mommy a hug,” she called twice. She gave up when she realized he couldn’t hear her over the television.



Kenny on the edge of town

Kenny had passed the mill and the school and Rudrick’s Bar and Grille. His backpack was loaded with everything he figured he needed to complete the mission. Three cans of fruit cocktail, saltines, a sweater, his old Cub Scout book, and a ball of string.

It was five o’clock, and this was as far as he had gone. After Carly had given him a ride back home from Outer Lark Street in the hardware truck, he got caught up watching TV. Then Aurelia made him lunch—tomato soup with crackers and a tuna-fish sandwich—and he’d started reading a comic book. The second-shift mill whistle brought him back to his mission. The only way not to let Cough down was to get to the college on his own. He packed and got out of the house before Aurelia could start supper. Nothing stopping him now.

“Hullo, Kenny. Wha’cha doin’?” Kenny looked both ways up and down the road, up into the maple trees along the highway, then turned a full circle, twice.

“Kenny. Over here. Under the car.”

Kenny stopped spinning, waited for his head to clear, and peered across the highway. WAGNER’S AUTO GARAGE & GROCERY. He didn’t know any Wagner.

“Kenny. Under the car.”

Kenny squatted on his haunches, scanned under the car parked by the gas pump, saw nothing, then began to lie down on the side of the road.

“Kenny. Under the Ford, the red car.”

“Red, white and blue. Red,” Kenny recited as he located the car in the garage, over the repair pit. After looking both ways twice, he crossed the highway and walked toward the repair bay.

“Wha’cha up to, Kenny?” the more familiar voice said.

“N . . . nothin’. I wasn’t doin’ nothin’.” When he rounded the fender of the Ford he saw Chauncey, the man who pumped gas into Aurelia’s Rambler and sometimes gave him a cream drop. Kenny liked

root beer barrels and black licorice a lot more than cream drops, but he always said, “Thank you, Chauncey” or “Thank you, Mr. W” if Aurelia was right there staring at him.

“Hi, Chauncey. What’re you doin’?”

“Working on this car, Kenny. Hey, ya heard about the mill?”

“Yeah, ’bout them maybe closin’ it?”

“Yes, yes. That would be terr’ble, terr’ble,” Chauncey said.

“I know. That’s what Cough said. He said we gotta fix it.”

“Well, sure. But how?”

“Uh, uh, I dunno. How’m I s’posed to know?” Kenny replied, suddenly remembering Cough’s warning.

“Hey, Kenny, I was just talkin’, ya know.”

“Yeah, I’m okay, Chauncey. I’m not doin’ nothin’.”

“Say, I bet you’d like a cream drop, wouldn’tcha? They’re the best, right, Kenny?”

“Yes. Thank you, Chauncey.”

Kenny climbed the two wooden steps up into the store, leaning heavily to the left to compensate for their rightward tilt. Chauncey was one step behind him. He handed Kenny a cream drop.

“So where’s Aurelia? Where’s the Rambler?” Chauncey asked. Kenny was examining the glass jar filled with root beer barrels on the shelf behind Chauncey, tugging on his left sideburn, the one longer than the other since Aurelia had last cut his hair too short.

“I . . . uh . . . I . . . uh . . . don’t know, Chauncey.” As panicked as he was, Kenny’s eyes remained focused on the root beer barrels.

“So you’re on your own, huh, Kenny? Havin’ an adventure?” Chauncey asked.

“Yeah, no, yeah, Chaun-zey, I guess.” A thick glob of sugary cream stuck to the roof of his mouth. He savored it, his gaze still fixed on the root beer barrels.

“Are you sure you’re okay, Kenny? How’s that cream drop, huh?”

“Idss good, Chaun-zey.”

“Then why are ya always starin’ at them root beer barrels?” Chauncey’s daughter Connie asked. She’d come in from pumping gas while Chauncey was working on the Ford.

“I wasn’t starin’,” Kenny said, reddening.

“Is this true, Kenny?” Chauncey asked. Kenny wanted to resist his eyes, but could not.

“Ye-yes, Chauncey. Root beer barrels are my favorite, and black licorice.”

“Then it’s a good thing Aurelia wasn’t with you today. All this time I thought it was cream drops.”

Kenny was silent, the full import of Chauncey’s statement slowly sinking in. He waited, hoping against hope that it was okay for him to like what he liked.

“Here ya go, Kenny,” Connie said, handing him a fresh root beer barrel she had just plucked from the jar.

Chauncey grinned at Kenny’s concentration. “Kenny’s on an adventure, Connie.”

“I thought so, Pa. Ya know it, I thought so, as soon as I seen that Aurelia wasn’t here.”

“Doin’ somethin’ for Cough,” Kenny mumbled, embarrassed.

“What? Are you on an errand, Kenny?” Connie asked in a humorous tone.

“Uh, kinda. It’s no big thing, just somethin’ for Cough.”

“Yes, Connie. They’ve got a plan to keep the mill open, ya know,” Chauncey added solemnly.

Kenny felt even more embarrassed. “Well, I guess I gotta go, now. Thanks, Connie. Thank you, Chauncey.”

“Here, take these,” Connie said, putting a handful each of root beer barrels and licorice into a small brown paper bag. “If you’re gonna save the mill, you’ll need somethin’ to tide ya through.” Chauncey’s eyebrows raised, surprised at her generosity.

“You say hello to Aurelia for us, now, Kenny. An’ tell her not to be afraid to bring the Rambler in again.”

“Okay, Chauncey, thanks.” Kenny felt suddenly more confident than he could ever remember feeling before. He was back on task.

By sheer luck Kenny headed in the right direction out of town, hiking toward the setting sun. He made the first quarter-mile on his sense of adventure, then began to hunger after Connie’s CARE package.

The taste of the root beer barrel still faintly on his tongue, he chose a twist of licorice to chew as he plodded along. He sucked thoughtfully. The anise filtering into his nostrils fired a synapse.

“Here, Kenny, you can have a piece of this,” his father, Wiley had told him, handing him a twist of black licorice. They were driving in the old Rambler, on their way to see Kenny’s mother in the hospital. Wiley drove carefully because his knuckles were so cramped that his hands were like claws.

Martha Hopewell had gone for a drive two days prior, alone in her car, until the paved town road had turned to gravel a mile and a half before the turn onto Route 93. She was overcome, drove off the road to walk into the brush. Her clothes were all wrong. She left them behind, and climbed naked into the briars, a blackberry patch. Her long black hair caught in the briars. Each cut of her flesh was a gift, a sign that she was on the right path.

Martha's best friend, Grindel Molshoc, had been telling her that she needed to get right with the Lord. Grindel's husband sure worked at it. It was all he ever talked about. Helmut had very definite ideas about God. God was vain and jealous.

But Wiley was too easygoing in the Ways, at least that was what Grindel always said. "A man cannot be lax in the Ways. Either his heart's got to have the fire for the Lord, or he'll be in it."

Martha had tried through gentle persuasion, but Wiley just snuggled up to her, pressing up behind, misinterpreting her intention. He was such a loving man.

Grindel assured her this was even more wrong. "You've got to tell him. He has to hear the Word plain and simple, and answer it himself, or not. You can help him to hear. But you can only save yourself."

Martha couldn't get him to have the fire. She withdrew more into the world of Grindel's church. It had been the only place where Grindel felt some measure of control.

Martha got out of the hospital in Wiley's custody. He took over the cooking and got Aurelia to do the dishes and pick up around the house. That left Martha more time to thumb through the Bible, and to stare blankly out her bedroom window at the willow by the river.

Kenny couldn't recall now whether he'd seen her at the hospital, or why she had gone back.

He just knew it had been a long time, years now, that he'd missed her.



McAdam in the bunker

He was back at the office, sitting in Ms. Axe's chair, the bent-necked lamp over the desk where his secret papers were spread out. There were no windows to the outside from Axe's work area, not like McAdam's office, where it was too easy to see in.

“Tic, tic, tic . . . tic, tic . . . tic . . . tic, tic.” The keyboard sounded like an anemic Geiger counter. McAdam was a two-finger, one-thumb typist, all on his right hand. The nails of his left hand were being gnawed away, in raw bitter bites.

“Zola could have finished typing this if she’d wanted to,” he pouted. “So selfish of her.”

He really hated this business. The need for subterfuge. But no one understood. It came with the job. It had to be done, and it had to be quiet.

Baxter McAdam was tall and despite occasional fits of dieting and working out, heavy-set. His once reddish-brown hair was graying and it would be wavy if he ever let it grow that long. But what defined him more than his size, and the cut of his business suits, the imploring and solicitous tenor voice, what now shaped his facial features into a mask of gregarious worry, was his role. He was a pitchman for an endangered species—the public university—one that could only be saved by becoming what it was not.

He was always having to determine exactly how to go about destroying the village in order to save it.

McAdam was only halfway through the second page, squinting at his own handwriting in the strangled light, when Wispen got the call at home that it looked like something was going on in the Bunker, near his office.



John Harlan, submerged

Files were stacked up to window level along three walls of the tiny den, one trail of them from the desk, to the door, through the hallway, into the bathroom. Yellow legal-pad pages and yellowing photocopies spilling out of worn manila folders sought their own level of disarray.

Once home, John Harlan had gone straight to the tub, and was now submerged, trying for sensory deprivation. It was like this every weekend, had been for two years, while he tried to write his dissertation. He was feeling stronger about this one, his third topic.

The United States military has undergone a sea change in the postwar world, not only in its relations with the rest of the world, but also in how it treats its own soldiers. The deliberate

exposure of soldiers to radiation from atom-bomb explosions at Ground Zero exemplifies this change.

This was not news; it was all true. The depression slowed him even more.

Breaking through the surface of the tub water, Harlan gasped and shook his head from side to side, water spraying from his dark curls. He swiped the back of his hand across his face to clear the water from his eyes, and grabbed the legal pad on the floor next to the tub.

The use of Agent Orange, involving massive exposure of soldiers during the Vietnam War, indicates a growing callousness, a rise in the perception of the soldier as the Other.

Harlan wanted to take a break, grab some dinner, catch up on grading, call his officemate Guppy to shoot the shit.

Instead, he plunged himself back down, below the surface.



Ernest Guppy at rest

Guppy was in his chair in the living room, combing through the *New York Times*. He scratched his beard along the jawline. “Celeste, did you see this about Tammy Faye Bakker?”

“See what?” Celeste knew her husband couldn’t control his addiction to the news. But she couldn’t see why he had to drag her away from whatever she was doing, in this case making dinner, to hear it.

“It’s really juicy.”

“Can it wait?”

“This is too good to wait.”

“Then come in here, Ernie. Don’t you want to eat?”

“Sure. Of course.” She waited for the telltale rustle of the paper, indicating that he was not going to move.

The paper rattled. She started slicing carrots again.

“Celeste!”

“What?”

“Would you *please* . . . are you still cooking?”

“Yes.”

“Sorry. I’ll leave you alone.” She counted backward from twenty. He was seated at the kitchen counter before she reached three.

“Listen to this. Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker denying claims about his sexual indiscretions.”

“Which indiscretions would those be?”

“Well, let’s see. He said he’s never been involved in wife-swapping, nor in homosexuality, and he’s never been to a prostitute.”

“What’s that leave? Bestiality?”

“Or some unthinkable fetish,” Guppy agreed. “Necrophilia, maybe. He would’ve been better off with the hooker, don’t you think?”

“Mmm.” She turned over the rice in the cooker, pressing a few grains against the sides with the edge of a wooden spoon to see if they were done.

“And it gets better. Tammy Faye wants to work in a doctor’s office. Can you imagine coming out of anesthesia, and the first thing you see is Tammy Faye?”

“Would that count as mercy killing?”

“Perfect. Assistance without physical evidence. They could clean up.”

Celeste studied the batwing eyelashes in the photo, from across the countertop. “Cruel and unusual punishment,” she muttered.

“You’re right. The Supreme Court will have to make a ruling. The majority probably in favor of Death by Lethal Reflection; Thurgood Marshall, Brennan, and White dissenting.”

“What’s this, Ernie?” Celeste said, pointing to a front-page headline.

“Didn’t you know? The Iran-Contra trial is beginning.”

“I wasn’t paying attention.”

“You weren’t? This could be bigger than Watergate.”

“It could, but I don’t think it will.” She turned from the counter to spoon the green beans around in the steamer.

“Well, you are awfully cynical, sweetheart. Didn’t you follow Watergate either?” He tried to pluck some crisp beans from the steamer basket. Celeste shooed his knuckles away with the spoon.

“Actually,” she replied, “I was riveted. I used to talk about it with my friends all the time. They said I was driving them crazy.”

“If you . . . then why aren’t you into it now? Why this attitude?” Guppy was slipping into graduate-school mode, contesting whatever she said.