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Technician

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I

Tommy Angelino had been out of work for over two months when, on an otherwise ordinary hot and muggy summer day, the first Sunday in August, his father slipped the folded morning newspaper between Tommy's bent head and his plate of bacon, potatoes, eggs and muffin. The kitchen where Tommy and his father George were sitting, kitty-cornered at the square red and white table with its silvery chrome trim, was blooming with yellow sunlight. Outside the window a cardinal, a streak of red against the unrelieved gray concrete of the back yard, perched on the cement birdbath and ruffled his pleated wings. Behind them the living room and the dining room windows were dark, the shades and heavy curtains drawn against the heat wave which had kept the temperature and humidity up, above ninety-five all week all over the east. The Angelino's small wooden house in Trenton with its velvet sofa and chairs and triple drapes smelled slightly sour, as if a feverish sleeper had tossed and turned all night, pulling the air in the house around him like a damp sheet.

In his eagerness to get Tommy's attention George pierced the bright, bulging yolk of Tommy's egg with the folded corner of the newspaper. Then, making matters worse, he apologetically grabbed Tommy's arm, causing Tommy to bite down painfully on his fork, all before Tommy was properly awake. Before his pale blue eyes were open. Tommy wasn't strikingly handsome, or even good looking. But his pale blue eyes were almond shaped - pretty, too pretty for a guy, his fiancee Arlette said. Tommy shook his head and continued swirling his fork with potato and egg on the end around the plate. Even though he was only in his mid-twenties, Tommy worried about eating too many eggs. But his Mom still made him eggs, bacon and fried potatoes for breakfast on Sunday. And now that he was living home again, the sweet, curling smell of frying bacon drifting up to the third floor got Tommy out of bed on Sundays. His dad didn't mean any harm. But still! At times like this Tommy longed to have his own place.

In May a narrow, colored slip of paper no longer than a pencil had unexpectedly been included with Tommy's biweekly paycheck. At first Tommy thought it was one of those cheery solicitations for a donation to the Red Cross or to the society for crippled or homeless animals. The slim pink message had flown out of his pay envelope and helicoptered onto the black tarmac of the parking lot, and Tommy almost didn't bother to pick it up. His back always twinged when he bent over, from an old high school athletic injury. Then when he stood up with a groan and casually read the typed message, Tommy felt as if he had received a body blow to the stomach: "We regret to inform you that as of May 30, 1983 your services will no longer be required by the Hogarth Pharmaceutical Company."

Services? Tommy worked as a clerk in the stockroom. It was his job to keep track of all the packages going in and out of the dispensary. He'd heard about the job through a friend of his Uncle Mike's. Now he was fired? Didn't he deserve more than a little pink printed slip? It was as if his doctor, friendly, white-haired Doctor Smyth, who had given Tommy all his shots since he'd had whooping cough in first grade, had unexpectedly told Tommy he had only six months to live.

"It's only a job," his friend Anthony said when Tommy stopped by his house that same evening for a beer.

"Right, Ants," Tommy agreed vigorously, as he opened the sweating refrigerator door to get himself a second one. But in his heart he didn't believe it. It felt like a death sentence. Tommy had only held three real jobs, unless you counted delivering liquor over the Christmas vacation.

But in another way he wasn't surprised. He knew he should have gone to college. But he didn't like any of the people from the high school who went to the community college, and all the courses were boring. Besides he could always go later, couldn't he? And he didn't want to ask Gloria and George for the money. Everyone else was, well, settled. But he, Tommy, just seemed to wander from one thing to another. Even at Hogarth Tommy felt as if he was still pretending to be a grown up with a real job.

He got dressed up in the morning in his clean white shirt, and he wore a tie sometimes too. But it wasn't really him. And they didn't

even care if he wore a tie at Hogarth so why did he bother. It was as if someone else parked the car and then stood clumped together with the others shaking out a Styrofoam cup from the clear plastic sleeve beside the coffee pot. Because real work was something harder, something grander. So he was still waiting, even when he had a job. Waiting for something to happen. And what was going to happen to a kid twenty-two years old from Trenton with no college and no marketable skills. What happened was that he got fired from the one job he was lucky enough to get through some family friend.

Even Anthony, Tommy's closest friend, seemed to have settled down, working in his father's business. And in high school if there was one thing that Ants was sure of, it was that he'd never work for his father. Never. Now, three days a week Ants worked behind the counter with his uncle, his aunt, his father, and two sisters and a cousin, at the Polish butcher shop in the Trenton Farmers' Market. Half of the customers hardly spoke English. Anthony and his sisters and cousins knew enough Polish to talk to the ladies with braids of white hair curled around their small, neat heads.

The butcher shop made enough to support two huge families comfortably, including the many relatives who, for one reason or another, were incapable of working. The customers, who stood on tiptoe three deep to peer over the counter at Anthony, wore cotton wash dresses or serviceable work trousers and handed Anthony fresh new twenty dollar bills. The business supported everyone, the old men who somehow never learned English and were lost when their wives died until the family found a widow or spinster for them. Then there were the boys - sometimes these boys were twenty-eight or twenty-nine - who got themselves in trouble with the police and had to be pried out of jail by fast-talking and pricey Jewish lawyers. The girls were less trouble, although they sometimes married men who beat them and pulled their hair out in clumps. Or worse, weren't Catholic. But if they got married, at least they were off the family rolls.

Ants complained bitterly that his father and uncle handed out money to the relatives - or worse to friends who were down on their luck - while they begrudgingly doled out bits of cash in tens and twenties to him. Tommy agreed vigorously that it was unfair. But he secretly wished his family could give him a job. There were never any paychecks issued at the Polish butcher's. A deep distrust of all governments and tax collectors placed a premium on cash transactions. The sign above the register said, In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash. And they meant it.

No wonder that the shop coined money. The little Eastern European ladies, their pale pink scalps showed between yellowish white strands of thin, tired braids, paid more than seven dollars an ounce for dried mushrooms shipped directly from the forests near Cracow. One thing was clear. That generation was not replaced. The younger women with their blond-haired kids bought cider and apples and the trinket jewelry, but the forests outside Cracow meant nothing to them. The store stocked imported lingonberries, their deep purple color regal enough for a queen's velvet cape, clark seeded mustard which gleamed like burnished brass, and bright cherry syrup in a bottle with a goose neck. At Christmas Anthony's father took over two hundred orders for their own cured ham. The West Side ladies from Princeton even came down at Christmas for one of those sweet hams. In the old days they sent the servants or the chauffeur. Now they came themselves. Just as if they didn't live in America, week in and week out their faithful customers came to buy blood sausage, thick black bread trucked down from Canada on Wednesday nights, and fresh horseradish root with threads like hairs sticking out from its gnarled trunk.

When he got fired, the second person Tommy told was his girl, Arlette. Well, she was really his fiancee. Whenever Arlette introduced Tommy to one of her relatives - they were all short, quick moving, and with beautiful sleek brown hair, just like Arlette - she said, "This is my fiancee, Tommy Angelino." And she'd hold her left arm in such a way everyone's eyes just swooped right down to that fourth finger at the word fiancee.

Tommy thought the whole business of being engaged was stupid. He didn't buy her a diamond, even though Arlette mentioned more than once that her aunt's husband was a jeweler in Philadelphia and a small diamond, she didn't care about a big one, didn't even cost that much. Well, Tommy wasn't going to buy a diamond, from Arlette's relatives or anyone else. But he did give her a ring, a little ruby set in white gold, for her twenty-first birthday last year. Tommy insisted it wasn't an engagement ring, but Arlette immediately slipped the little ruby ring right on her left ring finger where it stayed.

When Tommy told Arlette he'd been fired, she started to cry. So Tommy had to put his arm around her and hold her, "Don't worry." But almost three months later Tommy was no longer sure something would turn up. And now when Arlette asked him about a job, he stomped out of the room and shouted at the icebox for not closing. Then Arlette didn't ask him any more questions.

These days Tommy's father was home too, on disability. So the two men rattled around the house getting on each other's nerves. They even managed to annoy Tommy's mother, Gloria, who was as even tempered as a sunny day in June. Tommy complained to his mother that his dad sat in his bathrobe all day in front of the television, forecasting doom, not only for the immediate members of their relatively small Italian family, but for the rest of what he called civilization as well.

George dragged Tommy down three flights of stairs to watch a shaky news clip showing a collapsed fireman being administered oxygen on the sidewalk. Nothing seemed to cheer up George more than goodness gone wrong. That the person who thought he was doing the right thing, turned out to cause harm. The policeman who was chasing a fleeing two-bit drug seller when his heavy foot slipped on the accelerator, running his car up on the sidewalk and breaking the back of a woman loading groceries into her car. "That brought them up short," George would say gleefully, as if he himself had been responsible for bringing the poor foolish do-gooder up short. No justice, he would croak cheerfully at Tommy with his teeth out.

To his mother Tommy complained bitterly that George had the TV blasting all day - he was hard of hearing - making Tommy a prisoner in his attic room, which was stifling in August. While George whispered to Gloria as they lay beside one another right beneath Tommy's room, that if he, George, were able-bodied and single and in his twenties in 1983, he'd surely have found another job by now. He wouldn't lie on his back listening to some expensive tape recorder, waiting for work to come to him. We didn't have all

that expensive junk to play with either, he explained to Gloria, as if he thought she had suddenly arrived on earth from another planet.

Gloria sighed and rolled over in the sticky night. "That air conditioner must be broken, again," Gloria answered, and they both listened to the uneven gasps of the machine jammed into the scarred window frame.

Before his sickness. Well, it wasn't really a sickness. Before his injury George - he'd been christened Georgio by his Italian grandmother - before this happened, before his accident, George had never missed a day of work or spent a day in bed. When Georgio's father had been engaged to Tommy's grandmother they rode the trolley from Camden to Trenton, without any fear in the evening, and then the two of them sat on a stone bench, eating ices in the cool peaceful shadows of the old city graveyard. There, overarching, stippled sycamore and weeping cherry trees shaded both the tombstones of George Washington's soldiers and the graves of babies who died of whooping cough or diphtheria in the nineteenth century, to be memorialized by tiny carved stone rosebud garlands, trailing grainy granite ribbons.

The overgrown weeds in that same Trenton graveyard were now littered with broken half-pint bottles, obscene worms of slimy white rubber, and the syringes and needles of addicts. The broken-down cast-iron fence had given up on keeping out the drunks, prostitutes and dope pushers. The carved stone bench where Tommy's grandparents sat had long since fallen over and been buried by dandelions. The tilted slate tombstones were sharply chipped and edged now. But as if in compensation for all the indignities they had suffered, their flat, leaning faces were streaked a beautifully variegated black and purple from decades of soot-filled rain.

If Tommy had heard it once, he'd heard it a hundred, no a thousand times. How Georgio's father had never gone to school because his mother needed an operation. Just when he was a precocious boy of six teaching himself to read English with old newspapers he fished from the trash cans, brushing off the grease stains and the coal ashes. "Don't forget the grease stains, Dad," Tommy said, actually laughing out loud. As he lay in his child's bed with the slightly sour sheets kicked back, Tommy could fill in his mother's lines, too. In those days, children took care of their parents. And, I know, Mom, respected them. Well, his mother replied, now there was no respect - for the living or the dead.

Another persistent theme was how neither Georgio nor his father - and recently even Gloria was included in this part of the litany - had ever had his opportunities. What opportunities, Tommy wanted to know. To fight it out with the black kids who brandished knives and sometimes guns in the bathrooms at Trenton High? So that Tommy learned never to go to the bathroom from morning until afternoon. Tommy never told Gloria that because she would have made him transfer immediately to Sacred Heart. That was what education was today. Where were all those wonderful opportunities? True, he'd learned to read and write. Tommy even had taken a couple of courses at the community college. But that was hardly an opportunity, or even an education. What were they talking about, anyway? It was a jungle out there. When he finally found the placement officer at the college in his office on the fourth try, Tommy couldn't even get out of him a copy of the companies who listed jobs. In the office, they demanded proof of his current enrollment at the school. And, of course, he didn't have any. So Tommy left the office without getting any help.

But Tommy didn't feel like laughing three months after he was fired when he still didn't have a job or any prospect of a job. Every morning Gloria asked him if he was going to go by and check the bulletin at the unemployment office. It made Tommy mad to stand in line with all of the other dopes who didn't have jobs. So he just stopped coming down to breakfast so that she couldn't ask him until dinner time, when instead of asking directly she asked him what he had done that day. If Gloria told him once, she told him fifty times to call some friend, or relative, or relative of a friend, to whom she had just happened to mention that her son Tommy was looking for a job. Tommy got the impression that all of Trenton was consumed with helping him find a job and talked about nothing else. And there was a recession, too. Even if it wasn't a depression. Of course the government didn't call it that. But what else could you call ten million unemployed? And they always jimmied the statistics, so you knew it was really more. But mostly Tommy knew he was one of them. One of the thousands reported on the news, one of the six point zero percent was him.

Tommy had to give up the apartment he had been sharing with two high school friends. Three of them had gone away and then ended up back in Trenton, the place they couldn't wait to get out of as soon as they graduated from high school. At graduation they all vowed they never would ever come back to New Jersey. They'd be in Alaska, or Hawaii, or maybe California. But here they all were, back in Trenton five years later. Then Tommy's best friend Anthony practically lived in the apartment too because his mother wouldn't let him bring his Jewish girlfriend to the house. Not only wasn't she Catholic, but worse than that she was German. Ants had always had lots of girlfriends, even though he wasn't all that good looking. Usually he was sleeping with three or four women at the same time.

When Tommy was fired, his mom and dad said, of course he could have his old attic room back on the third floor. And Ants moved into his old apartment. But his old childhood room seemed cramped. Not that their clapboard bachelor apartment was so big, but he didn't have to tiptoe around in it. Back at home the attic fan ran all night with a loud, syncopated tick, in a losing battle against the steam bath of New Jersey in August, right next to his ear. At least he felt at home surrounded by his old baseball trophies. His uniform and equipment still stood ready, the toes of his cleated shoes curled up as if he had just stepped out of them. He lay sweating in the bed of his youth, staring at the all too familiar crisscross of electric lines and telephone wires framed by his dormer window and told himself soon summer would be over.

Still, a fellow shouldn't live with his mother and his father when he's twenty-three. Tommy had spent a couple years away from home. He'd hitchhiked on small planes across country. Half the time the student pilots took him up for the hours. When Tommy told his mother what a great time he'd had, she just shook her head. But she did sometimes wonder when he was going to grow up.

On Saturday night Gloria still waited up for Tommy to come in, sitting in her robe in front of the orange and green blur of the television screen. After he complained that he was twenty-three years old, thank you, she scurried into bed at the sound of his car. But Tommy heard her softly close the bathroom door when he tiptoed up the stairs. The television's demonic after-light, a tiny gleaming eye in the

center of the warm, darkening screen, told Tommy Gloria had just left the room as he groped his way between the light, shadowed mounds of the living room chairs shrouded in their white summer throw covers.

When Tommy didn't come home Saturday night at all, Gloria wouldn't speak to him or look at him until the middle of Sunday midday dinner. Even in August on Sunday a white embroidered cloth was put on the table and the family assembled in the middle of the day to eat pasta, and sometimes veal and sausage, and almost always soup, and usually pie and ice cream for dessert, because Sunday evening was the one night Gloria didn't cook. And ever since Tommy could remember, his bachelor Uncle Mike, Gloria's baby brother, now past fifty, joined them at the rosewood table for Sunday dinner.

On this Sunday morning George simply looked at Tommy and shrugged as Gloria slammed the screen door on her way out to the garage. She was going to church alone again. But this morning George was not interested in Gloria's mood. George had circled the advertisement in the Trenton Times with a blue laundry marker. Now he pointed to it again, jabbing the paper noisily with his finger, thick and square as a carpenter's chisel, while Tommy watched his mother's stiff shoulders, her upper body first framed and then draped with the rectangular webbed matte of the mesh screen, as she stepped down through the succession of shrinking, darkening images of herself on her way to say an extra set of prayers for Tommy's salvation.

"Read it," George said, excitedly. "It says 'laboratory or medical experience.'" George grasped the paper in his thick, trembling fingers and rattled it under Tommy's nose. Since his accident George's voice had lost its timbre. His entire body had shrunk in on itself. Tommy was glad to see him take an interest in something.

"Okay. Okay. But let me finish my breakfast!" Tommy, who wasn't fussy, did wish that his father would get dressed instead of spending all day in his not very clean blue terry cloth bathrobe. There was something repellent about the slack, blue-veined, pale flesh of George's calves. Couldn't his father put his pants on? Since today was Sunday at least George would get dressed for Sunday dinner. But he could get dressed during the week, too, Tommy said to himself, not really wanting to criticize. Instead of slopping around in those mothy maroon slippers all day.

Tommy forgot his mouth was full of egg and muffin. "Is being fired from a drug company previous medical experience?" he asked his father, laughing.

"Of course it is," George answered, full of certainty. "It's experience. You worked there." George looked around the sunny, daisy colored kitchen as if summoning the shiny kitchen canisters for support, or as if he forgot Gloria had left. "You ran that stockroom for over a year!" It was true. Hogarth had seemed to like him at first. His father sat up on the white plastic kitchen chair with certainty, and it was as if his blue robe with the grimy lapels had been turned into a snappy three-piece business suit. Tommy smiled at his father's exaggeration, but George was in no mood to be dismissed. He stared at Tommy sternly. It was time to get down to business. The whole summer had gone by, and he still had nothing. "O.K., O.K.," Tommy said.

That night George complained to Gloria that Tommy had no spunk, that was all, the kid had no confidence in himself. "Been babied all his life," George said grumpily, as if he were confessing it to himself.

Gloria flicked on the radio beside the bed. On some topics there was no point in arguing. It was worse than discussing politics. During these Sunday dinners George and Gloria's baby brother, Tommy's Uncle Mike, who was a former police officer, would get into fierce discussions about politics and crime. Before his illness George would jump up from the table and stomp around the dining room, making the china cups and saucers in the corner cupboard tremble. They both agreed, heatedly, that the city, not to say the country, was going to the dogs. It was a good thing the lawmakers finally realized it and had got around to doing something about crime. At least they had reinstated the death penalty, although Uncle Mike said they would never execute people for years. If at all.

Tommy sat silently or left the room during these discussions. His high school civics teacher, an earnest curly-haired woman in her thirties, who was far too pretty to be an old maid school teacher, had taken his high school class through a two week unit on crime, the prisons and the justice system. They even went to see a murder trial in court, all the kids shuffling and giggling as they trooped in and sat in the front pew to stare at the backs of the two lawyers, one in a blue suit and one in a gray suit, bent over so many papers on those big tables, while the judge, dressed in a comical black robe, frowned down at all of them from his elevated perch. The lawyers jumped up, waved their arms, turned heel on the jury, and then crouched over their wrinkled yellow sheets. The defendant, a thin young man who looked uncomfortable in his suit, sat without moving or changing expression throughout.

The class saw a film about drug abuse and went on a tour of the Mercer County jail. There Tommy actually saw someone he went to school with sitting on a plastic bench and smoking a cigarette, in a bare cell with not much in it but a cot and a stainless steel toilet with no seat. The fellow - to Tommy he'd always be Little Billy who couldn't connect the bat and ball - stared right back at Tommy through the bars. Maybe it was a mistake, Tommy thought later. Why didn't I wave hello? But Little Billy didn't acknowledge Tommy's existence either. Still, the little blue pig-eyes were unmistakably the same. Tommy was sure. Now those pink childish cheeks were covered with blond stubble and the little blue pig-eyes were steely and squinty, instead of puzzled. But the blond haired man with his sleeves defiantly rolled up to show a blue and black tattoo of a woman in a hula skirt was the same pale haired kid who Tommy struck out, and struck out again on the playground.

"Those benefits," George's voice was earnest. He dipped the triangle of his buttered toast up and down in his coffee now that Gloria was gone. "Once you're on the state payroll." His trembling hand almost knocked over the coffee. "All those benefits," George gestured vaguely around the empty kitchen. "They would have helped me, I'll tell you that."

Whenever George mentioned the violations his body had recently suffered, Tommy felt sorry. That this should happen to his own father! But the sorrow expressed itself as nausea. "You're right, Dad. You're right." Tommy shook his head to get the cobwebs out.

He tried to catch his father's enthusiasm. Wasn't that the least he could do for his old man who was, after all, only trying to help him. Tommy laid down his eggy fork and peered at the ad his father had pushed under his nose, turning the paper over absentmindedly when he finished, as if he expected to find more information on the other side of the page. The square advertisement, banded in black by the other columns, did not list a phone number or department. Just a three-digit box number for written replies before September 1, 1983.

New Position, Para-medical Technician.

Previous medical or laboratory experience desirable but not required.

Must be willing to go through six-month training period. High school diploma, some college, preferably science courses. Generous benefit package. New Jersey State retirement, disability, and health insurance program participation available after probationary period.

Poor George. No wonder he had benefits and insurance policies on his mind. He had been at home on partial disability for over six months. That was all he was entitled to after fifteen years of working as a guard for First Jersey Savings. The family had some savings, but the cash balances dwindled with a frightening, centripetal speed, a precious liquid being swirled down the drain with a disconcerting momentum, slipping through their fingers quicker than soapy water in the kitchen sink. After all, you couldn't not pay the doctors, could you? Gloria had started to hint that Tommy might help pay for the groceries.

There was a lot of talk about insurance. Tommy had never thought about insurance until he saw a kid working with him on liquor deliveries fall out of the truck and break his neck. They'd been horsing around together only a few moments before. The company couldn't even notify the family because it turned out his IDs were all forged. For three months the kid had been answering to a name that wasn't his. A nice looking kid too, tall and blonde with a neat diagonal scar across his tan belly. There was some sort of regulation that prevented the company from just cremating the body, getting rid of it, so his strangely peaceful, marble corpse stayed in the funeral parlor for a week. And Tommy, as the least important employee in the store, was sent over every day to inquire about whether or not it had been claimed. The company kept the insurance money in a special bank account for a year, in case someone from his family ever came forward to claim it. But nobody ever did.

Last March, when George and his partner at the bank were jumped at six A.M. in the parking lot as they went to clean out the night deposit boxes, Tommy's education in these matters began. Two kids knocked down Tommy's father, who broke his leg and three ribs in the fall, and then demanded the vault keys. Then, when George was lying on the ground in a muddy puddle, curled up in pain, they gratuitously smacked him in the face with a baseball bat, knocking out five teeth and cracking his skull. What most amazed George, though, was that these two black kids beat up his black partner with the same enthusiasm as they attacked him. Even though he got a whole new set of teeth out of the company, George spent three weeks in the hospital with tubes running in and out of him. For another six weeks, he had to drink his food through a plastic straw while waiting for his jaw full of wire to heal.

George still needed a cane five months later. The kids didn't even get away with anything but the forty dollars George and his partner together had in their wallets. The kids panicked when George fell down and screamed with pain and dropped the deposit bag as they ran away. But even if they'd been smarter crooks, they would have gotten very little. First Jersey Savings had several years ago taken the vault keys from the guards, anticipating just such an incident. The kids would have netted only what was in the overnight bags, and all of that was insured. The banks long ago decided they would make sure the guards weren't able to open up any of the big safes. As George said, the security people anticipated a hold up such as this would occur sooner or later.

"We were just window dressing," George said, sputtering through his new teeth. "Sitting ducks." That the company expected it, had set them up for it in a way, made George madder than anything. Only the illiterate teenagers didn't know that this kind of bank hold up was as outmoded as a stagecoach heist. They were as much dupes of the situation as George and his partner, or so it seemed to Tommy. And if it hadn't been for his father lying there in so much pain, Tommy would have laughed and laughed.

At least they had the death penalty now. A few months before George had his teeth knocked out and his head split open the state legislature had passed a law putting the death penalty back in place. Tommy happened to be driving past the State House on the hot July day the new law was passed. The TV crews stood among the tall ceremonial columns on the Capitol steps. With their headsets like space helmets, and their shoulders draped with cameras and wires, the TV people seemed to be messengers from another world, or perhaps just New York, as they turned the cameras on the clump of legislators and the governor, who was reading from a statement.

The news commentators were immediately recognizable by their bright-colored, stylish clothes, by their composure and their make-up. The interviewers seemed impervious to the midday July heat. The lawmakers were sweating and squinting under the camera lights, smiling just a little when the soft gray, foam-covered microphone was held in front of their lips like an ice cream cone.

Tommy saw the story on the news that same night. He recognized the skinny black woman in the bright red dress for whom the camera and sound crew made an empty circle as she talked directly into the snout of the camera lens before turning and offering the microphone and her profile to the lawmakers.

She asked a short, square senator, whose ambitious face glistened in the heat, when the penalty would go into effect and what would be the method of execution. The sweat poured down his face, the drops falling from his jaw like water dripping from a leaking tap. When the senator answered his glance was cunningly off-center, a little to the right of the camera. No, they didn't intend to bring back the electric chair, known familiarly as Old Sparky. After all, the senator said, the victims have rights, too. Yes, lethal injection would be the method. It seemed the most humane, didn't it? And he raised his eyebrows slightly as if to pass on the question to the audience

several hours away and on the other side of the screen.

Looking at the shiny coins of golden butterfat floating on the top of George's coffee, Tommy realized George's trauma, especially the exhausting, painful weeks in the hospital, just lying there and praying to recover to his former strength, had aged his father all too measurably. He had lost weight, a good thing everyone said, but his spirits had shrunk two sizes along with his waist. George now fell asleep in front of the television every evening after dinner, even if a movie with his favorite actor, Gary Cooper, was playing. Tommy saw Gloria turn away and hide her eyes when George stumbled over the names of friends who had been part of the family for decades. There was a ten year age difference between them, but this was the first time Tommy was aware of it. George who loved to play poker and smoke cigars, now sat for eight hours in his shabby robe - he wouldn't wear the new plaid one Gloria brought to the hospital - facing the plastic gray-blue television. From the bowels of the dark and empty living room he could be heard to sigh and mumble in reply to the eerie pulsating lights on the screen, flickering like a signal from a distant planet. But this Sunday morning George was awake, alert. Like his old self. And Tommy was glad to see it, even if the old man was getting on his case.

"What about your Red Cross training?" he asked Tommy shrewdly. When George didn't shave, his chin moved up and down like a soft ball, only covered with prickly gray hairs, like the chin of an old dog. The way his cheeks sagged over his nearly empty gums added to the appearance of grizzled, canine certitude.

True enough! Tommy had eight weeks of Red Cross training in lifesaving (and a certificate with a gold seal) from the two summers when he worked as a lifeguard at the swimming pool. Before he injured his back Tommy had also worked one night a week as a volunteer for the first aid and rescue squad. The baseball team supplied a fourth man to the rescue squad regularly one or two nights a week. In exchange the rescue squad collected money from the emergency room residents for team shirts emblazoned with a blue felt hawk's head and the team members' names. The money collected by the rescue squad also paid for an end of the season bash at the best Italian bar in Trenton.

Until Tommy freakishly injured his back - he dislocated his shoulder while pitching a curve ball - he enjoyed working with the rescue squad. The regular guys were men in their thirties or early forties who appreciated a pair of young strong arms to help carry the leaden weight of a stricken patient. Tommy learned the smell of excrement was the smell of death, as the body releases its earthly burden at the departure of the spirit.

Most of the time the guys sat drinking coffee in the hospital cafeteria or hung around behind the emergency room reception desk with the nurses. There weren't that many people who needed rescuing. They were fat, friendly men who liked taking charge, liked helping people in trouble. The residents in the emergency room taught Tommy how to give injections, the correct twist for a tourniquet, how to pump up the gray armband of the blood pressure kit and then listen to the thump of the heart through a stethoscope. Tommy learned how much power the doctors had and how they talked about the patients when they made a mistake, or weren't sure of something. He learned how to gently lift a man onto a gurney or a stretcher without inflicting pain and to quell his terror as the patient gasped at the oxygen while careening down the middle of the road, the beating red light of the ambulance splashing drunkenly over the cars clumped along the edge of the road like cowering animals.

"Full benefits," George reminded him, "means family coverage." He nodded his head sagely, a toothless, smiling sphinx. He was right of course. Tommy's girlfriend Arlette had been working as a legal secretary since high school. Now she wanted to quit, get married and go to community college part-time. Arlette said if she didn't go to college now, probably she would never go. Maybe she was right about that. George craftily folded his toast over his bacon to make an envelope and then crammed it all into his mouth at once, since Gloria wasn't there. In spite of all of the expensive dental work paid for by the bank, George preferred to eat without his new teeth. Sometimes he wouldn't put his plate in until supper. If Gloria caught him with his teeth out she ran up and got them back down and made him put them in. She said it was like going around with your pants unzipped. Tommy thought George liked to eat without his teeth because he could cram more into his mouth that way, although since the accident even his love of food had been diminished.

"And I wouldn't even have to move to Florida," Tommy said. He pushed aside the newspaper and pinched the last rubbery bite of egg into the stippled corner of his toast. George had been suggesting that Tommy go to Florida to work for an old Army buddy who, in George's words, had made a killing in dead bodies. George's buddy was the only licensed undertaker in a burgeoning neighborhood near the space center.

Tommy's evasive responses to this repeated suggestion became increasingly less confident as the glorious bright days of June turned into the suffocation of July and August, and his unemployment insurance ran out. The truth was with only a high school diploma there wasn't much to choose from for a guy who couldn't or wouldn't stand behind a counter all day selling something, or work pitching food in a steaming kitchen, or do day labor in construction, which was only a seasonal job anyway.

"The unions have every damn job sewn up," George said when Tommy complained one Friday that all the jobs listed at the unemployment office were for twenty hours a week at minimum wage, to do things like clean the drains and sewers in the city. Work they couldn't even make the prisoners do. When the city ordered the prisoners to clean out the sewers after a storm, some smart aleck civil rights lawyer got a court order to stop it. No wonder Trenton was broke. One week Tommy worked at slightly better than minimum wage as a delivery boy for a liquor store, but he had to quit when his back acted up. He was replaced by a Hispanic teenager who was on the lam from immigration and couldn't read or write English, but whose arms and back were strong.

Further surgery might have improved Tommy's condition, but he remembered all too vividly from years ago waking up in a cold sweat in the operating room just as the doctor was about to set his shoulder. He was all trussed up and tied to the table, like a piece of meat, surrounded by glass and chrome. People were staring at him over white surgical masks. The doctor, a bald, yellow-faced man dressed in dark green, wrinkled scrubs, was surprised to have a wide awake patient lurching off the table in the operating room an hour after the anesthetic. With seigniorial authority he gestured to a tall, redheaded nurse who was standing and unwrapping the

shining, sterilized instruments. The nurse Tommy would never forget her - came towards him with her green eyes wide open over the sexless white mask. She walked briskly over and stood in front of Tommy who was trying to free his legs.

"Put your arms around my neck, honey," she said, holding out her own freckled arms invitingly. Tommy groggily draped his arms around her neck, and as he sank into her bosom and inhaled her wonderful female smell the last thing he felt was a gentle punch, as if from an air gun, at the base of his spine as the needle entered. For the next two weeks he lay fiat on his back unable to move anything but his eyes because of a spinal headache. The pretty green-eyed nurse came to visit him regularly and ended up telling poor Tommy about the endless heartache with her boyfriend, a married doctor, as she changed his sheets and manipulated the tubes and bottles which fed liquids in and out of his immobilized core.

Tommy reminded his father, "The manager at Hogarth might write me a recommendation or even take me back when this slump is over." Now that his eyes were open and he had some coffee in him, Tommy could get himself going. "I was the only one in the stockroom who could make the damned inventory come out right." And it was true. No one else could get all of those little colored slips to balance. But then, if he was so valuable at Hogarth, why did they fire him?

Later George confided to Gloria, "He's living in a dream world, thinking Hogarth is going to take him back."

To her family and friends Gloria explained Tommy's situation by saying: "He was the last one hired and the youngest, so he was the first fired." To Tommy she said: "If they'd known you had a family to support, they never would have fired you. They thought you were a kid who didn't need a job."

Tommy sensed there was some truth to his mother's words. Hadn't the supervisor at Hogarth apologized when Tommy pointed out that he was the only reliable worker in the stockroom. The other clerk, a black guy, didn't do anything. Or hardly anything.

The supervisor, a kindly, fat man, who smoked and wheezed as he talked, tried to explain. "It's unfair, Tommy. I know it's unfair. But try to understand, The Hogarth Chemical Company has nothing against you personally." He took the cigarette out of his mouth, coughed, spit, looked around and continued. "Someone has to go."

What about him? Tommy gestured in the direction of the other clerk, who was heading off to lunch. You're afraid to fire him, Tommy thought to himself.

The supervisor shook his head, but didn't meet Tommy's eye. "Management," it sounded to Tommy like the Kremlin, "is impersonal." Tommy didn't want the guy to get upset and cough some more. He was embarrassed to see a man his father's age hang his head and lie and apologize because of some stupid front office policy. So Tommy just stomped out of the storeroom and went to collect his final paycheck.

"O.K., Dad, you win," Tommy said. That same week Arlette typed up a pristine letter of application for Tommy during her lunch hour. For three years she had been working in a small law office, for the nicest group of people, even if they were lawyers. But George was right, she wanted Tommy to get a real job so they could be married. She had been a fiancee long enough. All her friends were having baby showers, and after every one she found an excuse to quarrel with Tommy. These fights always ended with Arlette's tears seeping through Tommy's collar and then dripping down his back. Besides Tommy wanted to get married, too. Didn't they both want the same thing?

One of the older secretaries wrote those sentences about Tommy's medical experience. She made it sound like he was practically a doctor, but some one had just neglected to award him the degree. But there were no outright lies. When you added it all up, Tommy had done lots of things which had some relation to medicine. This secretary lined up all the other information about his schooling and other jobs so the piece of paper looked like a real resume. Tommy's life so far now filled three quarters of a clean white page, and he was only twenty-three. Even the weekend job delivering beer had been retitled, Retail Managerial Assistant.

When Arlette brought the letter and resume over to Gloria's house she was breathless, her olive skin dark against the butter yellow of her square necked sun dress. A blush escaped from under the harsh slash of powdered pink on her face. This was going to do it. Arlette was convinced. Full of hope she pushed under Tommy's nose the perfectly typed application, with its resume and bright white envelope with a flag stamp primly attached with a shiny paper clip, just like a letter an executive would sign. Tommy carefully aligned his small, blue signature in the space above his typed name, as if he were easing a brand new car into his own garage. Even his name now looked businesslike. Arlette had stuck in his middle initial which Tommy didn't ordinarily use. How did you know what it was? he asked her.

Arlette took the pen from him, smiled at her future mother-in-law, and blew on Tommy's small signature. Then Gloria laughed because Tommy had signed his name with a ball-point pen. When she blushed Tommy didn't at all mind the idea of getting married. He pulled Arlette down on his lap. She quickly folded the letter away in her purse, snapping shut the gilt clasp with her strong fingers. Those long, red lacquer-tipped fingers gave marvelous, deep back rubs, pulling the pain out from recesses between the vertebrae.

Tommy walked his fingers down the ridged, stepping stones of her bare back. It would be all right with him to move up the wedding date if he got a job. He didn't really want to move to a new state. If he got the job he could move out of his old attic room to his own place, where he wouldn't know that his mother was waiting for him. It was time for him to leave home, no doubt about that. Every time Tommy mentioned going to Florida, Arlette started to cry, saying she knew he'd never come back to Trenton and marry her if he left again.

So Tommy started to say he was going to move to Florida, just to tease. He was going to call his father's old buddy next week, or

tomorrow. He'd heard it was really pretty down there. He didn't want some crummy office job in Trenton. There were lots of things to do in that town in Florida, which had a college nearby with lots of pretty girls. Until Arlette caught on and threw one of Gloria's needlepoint cushions at him across the room, sending skimming and then crashing to the floor a translucent bone-white saucer, decorated with a wreath of roses, which had been consigned to be an ashtray years ago when its matching rose-ringed cup had splintered into a dozen pieces under George's elbow.

II

Gloria told Tommy to allow at least an extra half hour to find a parking place in the middle of Trenton when he went for the interview. The Capitol police swooped down like vultures to ticket and tow near the State House. "I'm going to play your birthday and the date today," Gloria said after breakfast, as she put the cereal bowls with their swirls of milky residue in the dishwasher. Gloria was on her way to her job as a bookkeeper in a laundry where everyone played the numbers: their house numbers, their birthday or their sweetheart's birthday, their anniversaries, or any other number which had momentary significance. The numbers racket had been taken over by the state, and the illegal bookies had been replaced by a newly grown tentacle of government bureaucracy.

A few years ago, Tommy and Ants used to hang out in the Italian bars in West Trenton, but now Tommy got lost in the one way streets. The government had taken over the city. He had to go back to the train station - that was new too - and start over again, as if making his way out from the maze of a spider's web. The buildings he might have recognized were boarded up or in the process of being torn down. There had been little reason for Tommy to go to Trenton recently, and he wasn't used to the city's daytime physiognomy: the pudgy, white-faced civil servants hurrying back from lunch at one fifteen, the young legislative assistants in brief, tailored jackets and short, pleated skirts, which flipped smartly around their knees as their high heels tapped down the sidewalk. These energetic young women were always clutching a newspaper, or a sheaf of bills, each boasting its own number in heavy block letters. Where were they hurrying to?

Then, the contrasting leisurely pace of the lobbyists and the silver-haired legislators who never missed a pair of sleek, stockinged legs scissoring by. These were men who had been trading in power since the time of Caesar, while the fresh-faced aides waiting outside the assembly meeting room and continually counting the votes were eternally young. The white world of state government, housed in those heavy sand-colored buildings by the river, filled the town with bustle and importance until the curtain rang down on the civil service day. Then the Capitol, pale white or steel structures, shining icy castles in the setting sun, were emptied out, left as enormous, dry, hollow combs until the hive's activity began the next working day.

Tommy had no sense of this world of bureaucracy, except to see that there was no place to park and everyone else in the world had a job. On this bright September day the sidewalks were filled with meandering office workers catching the last rays of summer. Trenton actually looked like an inhabited city, not like a shell abandoned at nightfall. Aside from his year in the stockroom of the Hogarth Pharmaceutical Company, Tommy's other jobs had all been jobs where he knew, and they knew, that he was only going to stay a few weeks. So what if he hated being a messenger boy, or being an hourly at the post office over Christmas? So did everyone else.

After high school he had wanted to go to Alaska; a friend told him there were bears there. But when he couldn't sleep at night away from home, even after a whole six pack, he came back. And now, here it was September four years later, and some of his high school classmates were going to graduate from college this year. And here he was stuck in a rut. Tommy could no longer fool himself. He had no job, no prospect of a job until this interview, and it didn't look like Hogarth was going to take him back. He'd left three messages with the supervisor who no longer returned his calls.

Tommy crawled along looking for a parking place on the narrow, pot-holed streets lined with sagging buildings which hid behind the skirts of the marble Capitol. If he could just tide himself over this bare spot, then maybe he could go to Alaska, or California. The clear blue backdrop of this fall day was kind even to these shabby nineteenth century tenements. A few hopeful tufts of green poked up between the cracks in the sidewalk. But there were no parking spots. Finally, Tommy just dumped his mother's ten-year-old car in a bus stop. When he slammed the door behind him Tommy noticed that his mother's car was the oldest car on this dismal street, except for the unidentifiable carcass of a machine which now had neither wheels nor engine. And this was a slum, wasn't it?

An old black man sat on a stoop drinking out of a bottle in paper bag. Where did the people who lived here get the money for cars? Tommy had heard Mike talk about pimps and drug dealers who changed out of their designer suits into ragged pants and frayed T-shirts when they went to collect their welfare or unemployment checks, putting on an appropriately stooped and deflated posture as they stood in line for their government handout.

Before dinner last Sunday, Uncle Mike told stories of rickety old wooden buildings, like the ones on this street two blocks from the Capitol, which were stacked high with cash and guns. Hundreds of hundred-dollar bills jammed into boxes or garbage bags. And that the people who lived in these buildings drove nothing but the latest Mercedes and Jaguars.

"I admire their taste," laughed Mike, who traded in his Caddy for a new model every year himself. This past Sunday Mike surprised everyone by announcing that finally two guys had been arrested and charged in the assault against George and his partner. Gloria came out of the kitchen and stood in the doorway, holding her flour-covered hands away from her hips as if they didn't belong to her body.

"You'll have to go and make an identification," Mike said to George. "Do a line up."

"One of them had a mask on," George said nervously.

"So, just say you recognize him anyway." Mike was speaking to Gloria now. "Look, by the time they're brought in for a line up you can be sure they have plenty of circumstantial. Besides, there are all those appeals. They go over every bent blade of grass."

George nodded, without taking his eyes away from the screen. "I think I'd recognize them anyway. The guy who hit me had a funny smell to him."

Tommy had been talking to Arlette in the kitchen. "You aren't going to get close enough to smell him," he heard Mike say, as he walked back into the living room.

"Anyway, they usually confess, don't they?" George asked. On TV the criminals usually confessed. Or they were so guilty they didn't need to confess; it was clear without saying anything they were guilty as sin.

Mike shrugged. The three of them turned back to the ball game. Gloria shouted a question from the kitchen where the water was running, but the three men either didn't hear or chose not to listen. The tiny figures in the white suits against the greenish background of the artificial turf had recaptured their attention. "Look at that. He never even saw it!" Tommy said when the pitcher curled himself into a ball and threw a perfect strike.

The bright September sun made Tommy squint as he climbed out from his mother's old car. An uniformed traffic cop, an old man who could hardly walk, told him the coffee-colored building next to the State House was the address on his letter. As Tommy passed, an old black gardener paid him no heed as he combed the earth between the chrysanthemums in the shadowed circular bed before the building.

The entrance hall had a marble floor and grand, if dusty Doric columns, positioned at the top of three long steps running the length of the lobby. Perhaps this was the original exterior. Behind these squat columns, the facade of an older structure, a dingy glass front display case held tattered banners and flags, the once bright embroidery of fallen armies now hanging limply from their gilt-tipped poles. Fallen down in the cases were the hand-written white cards identifying the local battle where these flags had once been standards. With its somber pink and black marble, the shining brass of the elevator door and the darkened gilt behind glass, the entrance hall might have been a Roman temple or an Egyptian tomb. This was a public building which introduced itself seriously, but perhaps because it was nearer the parking lot, almost everyone came in through the side entrance.

The white-haired lady behind the newsstand and candy counter had her rounded back to the empty marble foyer when Tommy pushed through the old fashioned revolving door. She turned abruptly when Tommy came up in his hurried way and asked for directions. But her eyes were sewn shut, and her face was tilted up but without recognition, when Tommy held the letter out and asked his question. A hand-lettered message taped under the glass above the peanut clusters said the booth was operated by the blind. No bills over a dollar could be accepted.

A young black man holding a white mop upside down and wearing a white turban, which was not much cleaner, wasn't much more helpful. "It's in the basement," he said, looking up at the ceiling and not at the floor he was supposed to be washing or at the piece of paper Tommy held under his nose. The large brass arrows on the clock above the elevator pointed to eleven. At least he wasn't late, yet.

The careful pressing Gloria had given Tommy's only summer suit had melted away. He must have put on a few pounds since he had worn it in June at his cousin's wedding. Tommy promised himself he would get back in shape, as he stood sweating in the sinking elevator which halted in the sub-basement with a bounce. The elevator cracked its square metal smile and deposited Tommy into a dun-colored concrete corridor.

The grayish floor was polished to a high sheen from decades of shoe leather and grit. A series of closed doors lined both sides of the corridor, which ended in shadows in both directions. There was not a soul to be seen. Here and there the wooden doors with glass tops were lit from within with a golden light. On the corrugated glass tops of some doors gilt lettering announced "Third Appellate Division - Records" or "Office of the Deputy Assistant Clerk, First Supreme Court." The rest room had the same heavy wooden door with glass the color of dirty snow and gilt letters edged with green, spelling MEN.

When Tommy found B-1309 - he had turned in the right direction by chance - it had no gilt letters. You could see translucent outlines of where the golden letters had been scraped off. The words in onion-like transparency were almost legible: "St rage Suprem J diciary." A white index card taped above the brass door handle had Room B-1309 typed in small ordinary type, with uneven spacing.

Since he was now a few minutes late, Tommy knocked and then immediately tried the door. Gloria said punctuality was the politeness of kings. The door was locked. From inside Tommy heard the scrape, scrape of metal chair casters over the uncarpeted gray-green concrete. Then the metal lock slid back invisibly. The door opened on a dark rectangular room whose only furniture was a standard, government issue gray metal desk and two chairs. A chair with a torn green plastic seat and an old fashioned square wooden chair faced each other across the desk whose gray-green spongy top showed several gouges. When Tommy sat down the wooden chair rocked diagonally on its round metal heels. Built into the wall was a gray metal bookcase, its shelves empty except for a forgotten stack of reports, with the date 1968-9 written in a shaky script across the unbound spine. A narrow window high above the desk did not shed enough light to read by. Two fluorescent tubes dangled from the ceiling.

The desk was empty except for Arlette's letter, which Tommy recognized by his own small blue signature, and the interviewer's black plastic briefcase with the state seal blurrily stamped on its face in gilt. The sleazy, matte briefcase lay aslant on the desk top, as if it had been jettisoned by an owner who was on a life-and-death mission elsewhere. The haphazard angle of the briefcase on the desk top was at odds with the rectangularity of the other cold and steely objects in the boxy room. Tommy's white letter of application was

another patch of bright contrast, its crisp vellum folds trembling like the wings of a browsing summer butterfly. The letter might have floated in from the window to light for a moment on the dented, grimy surface of the government issue desk.

Except for Tommy's unsteady wooden chair, this interior had a leaden immutability. The wooden chair added a clickety-clack after comment to Tommy's eager questions. The uneven legs teeter-tottered when Tommy lurched forward in an effort to follow his mother's advice, to speak up and make himself heard, to look alert and make a good impression. But his collar was choking him, and Tommy was damp and uncomfortable. He didn't feel he was making a good impression.

His own voice seemed to be coming from a great distance, from the end of that long lightless corridor. The cool of the dark basement had simply made him clammy. Besides it was hard to sound intelligent or even interested when answering all those questions about his health. Why were they so interested in his childhood diseases? What about his unfortunately abbreviated education. Finally, they did get to what the interviewer referred to as his job history. Tommy decided to be honest about that. He said he'd been laid off, but that he might be rehired by the pharmaceutical company. "I ran the whole stockroom," he said with a burst of energy and an interior salute to Gloria.

The interviewer was a small, tidy man who wore an economical gray three piece suit, a gleaming white nylon shirt, a sea-green tie, and thick horn-rimmed glasses whose extreme correction made the eyes behind small and inaccessible. Somehow Tommy never did get his name. Plicket? Truncett? Something with the cross bar of a T at the end? Never mind. The interviewer rarely looked up from the form he was filling out, and he seemed to expect little, and certainly not personal attention, from Tommy. Only short answers to his very direct questions. At first the man's voice was so thin and gray, coming from inside the modest drum of his tightly vested chest, that Tommy had to keep saying, "What's that?" and "Pardon me, Sir," - embarrassed that he hadn't quite caught the interviewer's name and couldn't address him properly. All the while Tommy was leaning forward so that the wooden chair clickety-clacked after his interjections like false teeth.

The interviewer wrote down Tommy's simple answers on a white and black Xeroxed form which had Tommy's name printed in pencil at the top. Tommy had no way of knowing whether he was the first, the tenth, or the hundredth person to be considered for the advertised position. When the interviewer asked about his police record, Tommy hesitated for just a minute. He had been arrested with Ants for joyriding in high school. They took Ants' Uncle's car, and damned if he didn't call the police. Then one other time Tommy had been arrested with a whole party of kids on the shore and booked for smoking pot. Tommy thought both of these probably weren't on any record, but he told the interviewer about the joyriding incident anyway. Explained it. Said, he and his best friend borrowed a relative's car. That way, if it came up. And as for the marijuana incident, he had given an absent friend's name and address to the police in Asbury Park anyhow.

When Tommy inquired about his chances, the man raised his head and stared at Tommy through his thick, concealing lenses and only said: "Of course there have been a number of inappropriate applications." Tommy stared back with his mouth open. What could be meant by that? "Your profile and qualifications are more in line with what we had in mind." Later when Tommy told Gloria that, she agreed it was encouraging. That sounded positive, didn't it? The interviewer said little else, however, and he clearly didn't like answering questions.

The job was in a state correctional institution. It involved some training, and there would be variety in the work. When Tommy asked about salary, the gray man looked up in a little book and then quoted Tommy a range of figures. Even Gloria was agreeably surprised. It was much more than what he had been making at Hogarth. By the time you counted the free health insurance - maybe that was why they asked so many questions about his medical history - and the other benefits, like retirement, it was more than three times Tommy's former wage.

Tommy noticed that the interviewer had filled up only about half of the page with his pale, neat writing. Tommy asked to sign the sheet at the bottom where the date was. They didn't seem to want Tommy's stamp on anything else. At the end of the interview the man threw Arlette's beautifully typed letter into the empty mouth of the gray metal wastebasket, which seemed a shame to Tommy, although he guessed they had everything they needed, his name, date and social security number now, as well as his phone number.

"Come back two weeks from today, same time," the interviewer said. He ripped off the sheet with Tommy's identifying information and those faint penciled notes and put the piece of paper in a folder. For a brief moment Tommy thought to himself: He's going to offer me the job right now! But the interviewer just continued as if talking to himself. "Of course, a stable background is required. Some testing. There are educational requirements."

What sort of education? This had always been Tommy's fear, that not going to college would catch up with him.

"But in your case the practical experience will count for a great deal." The interviewer wasn't very specific about the kind of education, although he had listened intently when Tommy described his work with the rescue squad. "There will be three of you," the gray man continued, clipping the gilt clasp shut on his plastic briefcase. "I think you understand the situation. The need for confidentiality. The waiting period."

Tommy didn't understand any of it. What need for confidentiality? Because it was something to do with prisons. Maybe they were worried that he had a record. Those opaque glasses gave out as little information as the wrinkled gray glass on the top of the office door. "We'll provide all of the technical training you'll need, of course," the interviewer said.

Tommy could hear someone moving around outside the door. The interviewer flipped back his paper white shirt cuff to check the time. "Well, then?" He held out his hand with a ghostly smile. When he stood up he was surprisingly small and compact, as if he himself could have been folded away in the black plastic briefcase. He briefly touched Tommy's hand to terminate the interview

before scurrying to unlock the door. Tommy hadn't realized the door had been locked behind him. When it was snapped open, Tommy hurtled through immediately. On the other side, so close Tommy thought he might have been listening at the key hole, was the next candidate, a stout, balding man in a tan suit, holding in both hands a straw hat with a striped blue and red band. He turned the hat in front of his puffy belly as if he were winding up a rope. Farther down the corridor a tall, lanky black man in a blue jump suit, he looked about Tommy's age, watched Tommy and smoked as he leaned against the wall with one foot up. Tommy wondered if he was waiting for an interview, too. As Tommy turned to go back towards the elevator, the black man ground out his cigarette butt into the smooth concrete floor.

III

"I'm the hangman, then," Tommy said to himself two weeks later, as he rose in the gray and gold steel coffin of the elevator with its heavy ornamental brass door. Today the legislature was in session. The marble entrance of the State House sent back a smart click, click from the busy heels of lawyers, secretaries, lobbyists and clerks. Outside the October sky was bright and the air crisp, the clouds white as a sheet of new foolscap. Funny, Tommy had always thought of the hangman as a big, burly-chested fellow with a black hood over his head. Just two slits for the eyes. But no, it was going to be himself, Tommy Angelino, a regular guy, a nice guy who never hurt anybody. Didn't the high school baseball team elect him captain? That proved everybody liked him, didn't it? Gloria used to complain the house had been taken over by his laughing friends, although she actually liked them. Now he wasn't going to be allowed to tell anyone, not even his friends, or his old teammates, or his mother, or his fiancee, what he had been hired to do. His real job title - Execution Technician - would not appear anywhere on his personnel file or on his payroll record. Instead, an imaginary job description and title, First Assistant Deputy Correctional Agent, had been created to cover up what he had been hired to do.

There was a probationary period for the job. There would be three of them. Three hangmen altogether. Of course they didn't use the term hangman. Three execution technicians, the gray man told Tommy. Or, first assistant deputy correctional agents. And they weren't hangmen. They didn't string people up in America in the 1980's. The execution technicians would be the ones who would administer the lethal injection. And why three? So that none of them would know who actually caused the death.

"Otherwise it might be on your conscience," Tommy interjected abruptly, teetering forward again on the uneven stubby legs of the wooden chair. The interviewer's small mouth twitched, quickly, like a rabbit's nose. He explained the job title and description again, emphasizing once more the need for confidentiality, speaking slowly, as if he thought Tommy was too stupid to have gotten it the first time. Tommy got the impression he'd be fired if he told anyone what he had really been hired to do.

The execution technicians were going to sit behind a curtain. What kind of a curtain, Tommy wondered. A heavy, ivory-colored curtain like the one in Gloria's dining room? A slimy blue plastic curtain like the one in the pitted shower in his old bachelor apartment?

"Isn't there someone who will know?" Tommy asked.

The voice from behind the thick glasses was patient, with just a slight edge of sarcasm. It hesitated, as if it considered not answering. "The warden will know," the gray voice finally replied.

"Why the warden? Besides, the guy who sets up the . . . thing . . . the apparatus . . . whatever it's called. He'll know which tube has the . . . stuff. The injection. I mean, someone has to load it." Tommy stopped himself. The interviewer was silent. He sat immobile, gray and papery. Tommy couldn't see his eyes.

"And what about the witnesses? The description. You know, the description of the thing. It said there would be six witnesses."

"No," the interviewer replied. The color of his suit blended in perfectly with the dull green desk top. He was not going to address any of Tommy's questions. "They never see you. No one sees you. The witnesses are just . . . well, just part of the public participation."

"What? . . ." Tommy had been going to say, "What if I mess up?" But he thought better of it. He decided the gray man didn't want to hear about that. His job was to hire someone. Once that was done his responsibility was over. Besides someone had probably thought of what to do if he messed up or made a mistake. And how could he mess up? It was pressing a plunger. It didn't take any brains to do that.

"A certified IV technician and a physician will be present," the rabbit's mouth said. "To resuscitate, if necessary."

"Resuscitate?" Tommy exclaimed, tipping forward rapidly to a loud clatter. "What's the point of that?" He felt like laughing out loud. Later Tommy reproached himself. No sooner had he got a job, and a good job, too, than he was saying stupid things. Making his new boss regret having hired him.

"Well," the rabbit was almost apologetic. "In case there is a last minute pardon. Or a reprieve."

Tommy clamped his mouth shut and nodded. Here he was on the verge of losing the job before he actually had it. Tommy pushed himself out through the revolving door and into the waning October sun. But he guessed he hadn't done anything that bad because the gray man told him to report to work at the prison the next Monday. So he did have the job after all.

George nodded vigorously, his chin bobbing up and down and taking the phone receiver with it. Uncle Mike wanted all the details. "Full benefits, including maternity." Gloria hung her head over his shoulder, waiting to fill in if George left out something. "Three times his former salary. Plus disability, dental, and even retirement." George continued laughing. When he laughed, Tommy saw he had his teeth out again in the middle of the day. Gloria ran upstairs to get them, shaking her head at Tommy as she passed him on her way.

"Right in Trenton, isn't it?" George asked. Tommy nodded. And George nodded again into the telephone. "No, Mike, it wasn't six months." George shook his head. "No, only since June." Tommy shook his head. He had been fired in May. "I know that's a long time to be unemployed. But it's not six months." George smiled. Tommy shook his head again. "Mike, there's a recession out there. Oh, I know it's not the thirties, but . . ."

Tommy first tried out the cover story on his mother. He'd be working as a corrections agent in the records department of the prison, or the correctional facility, he explained. He told his mother his official title, first assistant deputy correctional agent. Probably they'd shift him around some, he explained to his mother. He'd be getting some training. She was preparing dinner in the kitchen, so at least she wasn't looking him in the eye. Tommy looked around the counter? No asparagus? he asked. Tommy loved fresh asparagus.

Sometimes he'd be in the mail room, sometimes in the administration. Gloria smiled and smiled, as if she couldn't believe his good luck. She didn't ask any questions. She just went on peeling the vegetables for Tommy's favorite Sunday dinner: roast pork, pan browned potatoes, carrots, onions and fresh horseradish and sour cream. Gloria's eyes were streaming from cutting the onions. Don't pay any attention, she said, wiping her tears on her apron.

Tommy was leaning against the sink and staring out the window into the asphalt-covered backyard so that he could avoid looking into Gloria's tear streaked face. Even though he knew it was the onions, seeing his mother cry made him feel like crying too. In the small square concrete backyard the metal picnic table was draped in plastic, although winter was not near. They had hardly eaten there at all this summer. The chairs lay helplessly upended, their thin elderly legs in the air. Gloria popped a carrot into her mouth, blew her nose and said, "So you'll get married, then."

Arlette was coming momentarily. In the background Tommy could hear George still shouting to Mike over the phone, but it was no longer about Tommy's new job. A subpoena had been delivered to the house by a man with a badge of some sort, but not a police officer. George thought he was being arrested. Mike was explaining that he was just being called to court as a witness, George covered his other ear with his hand and nodded.

"Arlette's older than you were when you got married," Tommy said to his weeping mother. A blue jay took a cheeky perch on one of the metal chair legs. Tommy rapped on the window, but the bird just stared back at him through the window and ruffled its feathers.

"What's all the medical experience for?" Gloria broke a peeled carrot and held out half to Tommy. Tommy had hoped they were finished with the subject of his job. Oh, that. Well, he was supposed to be a back up for the prison doctor on minor things. To go in for one of the medical nurses when the doctor was busy. You know, write down complaints and things. He would be giving out pills. Who knew, even maybe giving injections. Of course, anything life threatening a real doctor had to do.

Gloria was spooning pan drippings over the onions. She pushed a strand of hair out of her eyes. "I don't think he's getting any better," she said, nodding her head towards the voice coming from the living room.

Then Arlette came bounding into the kitchen, crashing against the table and almost toppling it. Arlette usually sported large bruises from bumping into low lying objects. She was shortsighted, but wouldn't wear glasses or try contact lenses. She could sweet talk her way out of it, she said, if a cop stopped her and asked about the restriction on her driver's license. It was contrary to her nature to slow down or accommodate to obstacles. Now, here she was in the kitchen, almost knocking over Gloria who stood behind the table with a spoon full of drippings in one hand, and crashing into Tommy from behind. Her arms and legs were flying, her voice was high, shrill and exciting. With her presence the kitchen was suddenly full of people. The globe of tear-stained apprehension between Tommy and Gloria was shattered into a thousand specks of light.

"It was my letter, my beautiful letter." When Arlette laughed, she was so young, so pretty, everyone around her had to smile. "It was. It was," she insisted, jumping up and down.

"No. No," Gloria said, straightening up and wiping her hands. "It was because I played his birthday the day of the interview." Gloria put her hands on Arlette's shoulders to hold her still long enough to kiss her. "Then I played it backwards."

Tommy laughed, too. "Don't forget, I'll be on probation for six months," he warned. He watched these two women toss their happiness between them. He guessed he would do anything for either one of them. Gloria dribbled drippings and herbs over the roast, as she danced from side to side. Then she squeezed a lemon from high. The chops were held neatly to the bone with string tied in bows by the butcher. "Did you get that at Ants' place in the market?" Tommy asked. Gloria nodded. "I keep saying I'll go to the supermarket, which is cheaper, but I end up back there."

Arlette bent over and plucked out a darkened onion skin as the pan slid back into the oven. Tommy propelled Arlette backwards into the living room. "God, you can eat all the time." Arlette was all spiky arms and legs and barely weighed 120 pounds, although she regularly ate him under the table, including pizza, fried onion rings and fudge ripple ice cream together, any one of which would give him indigestion. As the door swung closed behind them Tommy heard Gloria run the water to rinse her hands in the sink and start singing to herself as she made bubbles, splashing the water over the pans in the sink.

Tommy wanted to put off the wedding until after January, but Arlette had her heart set on getting married over Christmas. A friend of the family had offered them a banquet hall on the Sunday between Christmas and New Year's at the ordinary, not the holiday rates. Even Gloria thought that was too good to turn down. George still wasn't fully recovered, but at least his medical expenses were leveling off. And for the moment he was well enough to enjoy his son's wedding, so why not go ahead?

I haven't even been working a month, Tommy wanted to object. "Oh, I guess it doesn't make any difference," he said instead, giving

in to his mother. He suspected Arlette, who grinned, had put his mother up to asking him.

When the date was set, Gloria was as excited as Arlette. Gloria hand embroidered a set of sheets, table linens, and hand towels. Every night she sat sewing bright blue and yellow cross stitches on the white cloth. She even stopped telling George to put his teeth in. The little pastel crosses flew across the material, and soon there was a whole bouquet of embroidered flowers, with ribbons trailing across Gloria's lap.

Arlette's mother - her father had died some years earlier - gave the couple a pull-out sofa. Another cousin had by sheerest luck heard about a tiny house a few blocks from the prison where Tommy would be working eventually. The house was just a couple of miles from Gloria's, close to Arlette's favorite Italian ice cream store, near the river and the railroad tracks, in what was still an old Italian neighborhood. The house had one tiny bedroom, a small square living room and a narrow kitchen with a window which looked out onto its own minute patch of grass and the arching branches of the neighbor's magnolia tree, which carried heavily scented purple tulip flowers for a few days in the spring. In winter its bare arms rested emptily on the tarpaper roof of the neighbor's garage.

The house was like a play house. It had been fashioned by a carpenter who worked at the prison as a place to live in alone after he retired, but he didn't survive to take advantage of his own compact design. The family was happy to rent to a young couple. Arlette's office gave her a kitchen shower. Between the coffee aparatus, the toaster oven, and pans from the lawyers and secretaries, Gloria's linens, and the ceramic table lamps and end tables Arlette found in Gloria's basement, the young people were ready to set up housekeeping in their miniature home without spending any of their own money.

Even though it was in the middle of the Christmas rush, when everyone was tired, the wedding was happy, with a bottomless supply of pink sparkling wine, a five-tier wedding cake crammed with candied fruit and a fluted border of sugar roses. On its highest layer, the circle which contained all of Arlette's dreams, a black-haired bride in a gown of spun sugar and a groom in a licorice top hat stood beneath an arch of real roses. Tommy and Arlette twirled around and around the hall full of streamers and flowers. Arlette said her cheeks were so tired from smiling they ached for a week. Tommy danced with every woman and girl in the room, and with Arlette as often as he could in between.

In the middle of the wedding party Uncle Mike came and slapped Tommy's back hard, saying, "Well, my boy." He really did call Tommy "my boy." Probably because he had no children of his own to tease him about talking like that. For a wedding present he had given the young people his car, a year-old Cadillac. Quite a gift, George pointed out. Tommy wanted to say more than thank you, but he couldn't find any other words. So he just pounded Uncle Mike on the back, and said, "Thank you. Thank you." All of a sudden Tommy was a man with a car, a house, a job, and a wife, instead of an unemployed dropout.

"What next? What next?" Mike asked. Tommy looked over his shoulder and saw Arlette laughing with her head thrown back. Tommy loved his uncle, but that slap had hit him in the wrong place on his shoulder so he just grinned and bobbed his head, bending over to mask the pain. Fortunately, Uncle Mike didn't seem to expect an answer, he just grinned and stared at Tommy and said again, "Well? What next?" Tommy was too tired to think of anything new to say, he just hugged his uncle and thanked him again.

Arlette couldn't wait to quit work. Tommy wondered what she would do all day without a job. As if she sensed his worry, at the end of every day Arlette told Tommy in detail about how she spent her time, looking for a bathroom rug, having lunch with the still unmarried and now frankly envious girls from her high school who felt trapped as clerks and secretaries in the state government.

Arlette never asked Tommy what he did all day. What he did was serious, and important, and permanent. Actually Tommy didn't care much what she did during the day as long as every night she was waiting for him to come home. After dinner they hurried into the boxlike bedroom which barely held their new queen-sized bed and made love and fell asleep in each others arms. Then Tommy woke in the next morning and waited for the night all day the next day.

Arlette turned the tiny house into a home for two surprised people who had never had more than a room to call their own. Gloria said it first, Tommy overheard her. He's very happy, she said. He's really very happy. And it was true. To think that only a few months ago Tommy had actually considered moving to Florida. Who would want to live there? To think he considered going to work for that old friend of his father's, the mortician. Had even thought, in more than a passing way, it would be fun to be single in Florida near that community college. How foolish and youthful that all seemed now. He was a married man, with a home, a job and a car.

Tommy left the house promptly at 8:45 each morning. At 7:30 Arlette fixed him a hot breakfast of oatmeal, bacon and eggs, or waffles or French toast - which she ate as well. At this rate he'd look like the other paunchy guards in a matter of months. When Tommy didn't exercise, the flab came and draped itself in layers all over him, like a shroud. Then Tommy went off to the little room he had been assigned temporarily in the basement of one of the anonymous state office buildings. There he had his own desk, chair, a bookcase and nothing to put in it and a phone. The supervisor explained that during the probationary period it had been decided to house him away from the prison. Later, the supervisor explained, when he was in training at the prison, he would have an office, or at least a cubicle, there. But now his presence among the other prison officers would just raise questions, since there was nothing for him to do, yet. He had been hired, but no one was sure what to do with him. Someone was working out the details.

"How come you're in the State House all the time?" Gloria asked suspiciously. "What are you doing?" Gloria sensed that paper work would not be what Tommy was going to be doing. She sometimes called Tommy from the dry cleaning plant where she worked when the shift was changing, while she was waiting for her ride home. It was true Tommy had no specific duties. Twice a day the mail cart would rattle past his closed, opaque door and occasionally a pink interoffice envelope, a bright paper tongue, was stuck out at him through the square mail slot in the door. Those interoffice envelopes contained blurry mimeographs of the new state policy on smoking in offices or notifications of a change in the tax reporting of social security. The messages from the head of administrative services, or his deputy assistant, were sent spiraling into the green metal wastebasket beside his desk. Most of the time Tommy sat

in the office and read the newspapers. At least he could skip the want ads.

"It's awfully quiet there," Gloria said. He could barely hear her over the crashing and clanking at the dry cleaning plant. "Don't you work with anybody? Where's your boss?"

Tommy heard a blast of steam behind her question. Perhaps because she couldn't hear him very well Gloria seemed satisfied when Tommy explained that he was only temporarily alone. Really, he had a lot to do or a lot he was about to have to do. He'd have responsibilities. Gloria didn't seem to hear the lie when Tommy said he would be working at a clinic for drug addicts at the prison. In the meantime he had to do some reading in preparation.

"I don't know," Gloria said, over the hiss of steam and the ringing of the cash register. "Working for all those prisoners. . ."

I won't be working for them, Tommy started to answer. But before Gloria could finish her ride came. Wasn't it almost true, what Tommy had told her? It would be different when he moved to the prison. There would be more for him to do then. There would be others there. Including the two others who had the same job.

IV

"No questions then?" the man in the gray asked, pausing before he stamped PERMANENT on a pale yellow folder which now had Tommy's name typed on the tab. The gray man carried a rubber stamp and the stamping pad in the same black plastic fold-over briefcase with the gilt state seal. The interview marked the end of the four month probationary period. The state even made him have a physical. Well, Gloria said, at least they got you to go to the doctor. It was true. Tommy distrusted doctors. Feared them. Their high rates. And what about all those unnecessary operations? Tommy thought of a hundred such questions the day of his examination. But the doctor who gave him his physical was a doddering old man with front teeth missing from his watery smile and a thick brush of black bristly hair growing out of both ears. He never once looked Tommy in the eye, as he told Tommy to turn around, lie down, bend over, pull apart his cheeks and open his mouth.

Tommy shook his head, looking out the small slit of a window above the supervisor's head. No questions. Everything seemed settled. It was less than six months ago that he had come to the same room for his interview. It felt like six years. It was four o'clock and had started to snow - big, heavy, soft clumps hitting the small, dirty window and then sliding down the pane to melt into the cracks around the lead frame. It was late January and six inches were predicted. Tommy wanted to get started for home before the roads became covered with a shiny skin of ice. He wanted to drive Arlette to the store. She was afraid to drive in bad weather.

The gray, rabbit man was explaining that probably nothing would happen for at least a year or perhaps even two. "Not withstanding," the supervisor explained, "it's important to have all the personnel in place. . . for legal reasons." Tommy's file had grown to the point where it had at least a dozen pieces of paper in it. None of them bore his signature.

Tommy nodded, as if he understood. The big star-shaped snowflakes were plopping against the window like insects hitting an electric exterminator. "For legal reasons," the supervisor continued, "everything must be done exactly according to the regulations."

If Tommy didn't leave soon, he'd surely be stuck on the road, with trucks bearing down on the back of his neck. Or he himself would be trapped, gripping the wheel and swearing, behind a timid driver with no snow tires. What about the other two, he wanted to ask. My partners, where are they? Tommy watched a dazzling curtain of snow form on the outside of the grimy window. He just wanted to go home.

Before the supervisor stamped PERMANENT on his file, Tommy had to take another written test. The supervisor's nose twitched. "The psychologists. . ." he said, pushing a paper and pencil under Tommy's nose. Was he smiling? "I had to persuade them you weren't too young." No, it wasn't a smile after all. Just a flicker, or perhaps just a twitch.

"Do you agree in a general way with the precept 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth?'"

Tommy checked "Most of the time." "Always" might be regarded as too extreme. "Never" was clearly the wrong answer. Somehow "Occasionally" didn't quite describe how Tommy felt about vengeance. Vengeance? It was a word out of the Bible. Not a word Tommy used everyday. He wasn't particularly mad at anybody. But when he thought of someone harming Arlette. Or the unnamed, unborn baby which might be inside of her. He didn't think words then. He just felt his face get hot and his feet moved around on the floor if he was sitting down. And his hands itched. But to do what? To do what?

As for the question: "Do you believe the courts and the criminal justice system are usually fair and just?" Tommy just checked "Most of the time." But when the piece of paper asked if he ever got drunk or smoked marijuana Tommy couldn't figure out what to say. It wasn't believable that anyone who was in high school in the late 1970's had never smoked marijuana. So Tommy checked "Occasionally" and then wrote in the margin, "But not now!"

He did not know how to make up answers to the personal questions. Of course he was married without children, for the moment. His parents were both living. He didn't have any hobbies. Chewing the pencil and staring over the empty desk at the man in gray, Tommy wanted to lie and say that he played backgammon, or at least the guitar. Baseball! He loved to play baseball. But he hadn't played for several years. He checked sports. Staying in bed with Arlette on weekends when he could persuade her that whatever had told her to get out of bed and get dressed could wait. No space for that. Couldn't put that down. Who would know whether or not he really played backgammon, Tommy thought, as he folded over the answer sheet and handed it to the supervisor. Tommy sort of knew how it was played. He'd watched Gloria and her friends play one summer, when the family uncharacteristically rented a bungalow at the shore.

Funny, he hadn't seen Gloria or any of her friends play the game since that summer, which must have been a decade ago, at least.

It turned out no one would ever have known about Tommy's white lie because the supervisor, he was wearing the same suit, the color of gray-green newsprint smudge, quickly took Tommy's sheet, checked over his entries against a Xeroxed code sheet he removed from the plastic brief case, made some checks and zeros next to his answers and came up with a score of twenty-six. The supervisor wrote the final number down on a separate piece of paper with only the date, January 29, 1984, the number 26, and Tommy's name on it. Then he tore up Tommy's test sheet and dropped it in the wastebasket. So Tommy could have put down backgammon, or the guitar, or tennis, and no one would have known the difference. No one would have cared. Passing the test seemed to be another one of those official milestones, like being made PERMANENT, or being hired, an event which didn't really exist anywhere. But someone somewhere on some piece of paper said it had to be done. And someone made it happen. So he did what he had to do to do it. It was another official thing which the state did with its invisible bureaucracy, behind its own back. And now he was Permanent. Now he was in place. He had passed the test. Silly as it was. The supervisor smiled at him. Somehow it had come about. He really had the job. The title was attached to his name on a folder. He was the one who was going to do it. But not now. Not yet. Later. Later, he'd have to do something. Perhaps. Now he just had the job and the title.

As the winter settled in Tommy actually was busy. They did give him an office in the prison itself. He was interviewed at length by a consulting psychiatrist who had worked for the prison for many years. The psychiatrist, a humorless man with a short European beard, also never wrote anything down, although Tommy supposed that the confidential file with his name and title on it was growing larger somewhere inside the dark interior of a locked cabinet. Tommy sensed that somehow all of these people lied about what they did too, the supervisor, the prison doctor, the psychiatrist. They were probably like him, people who couldn't get jobs anywhere else.

All of those regulations and procedures in connection with the new penalty. There were twenty pages of administrative directives printed up on blue recycled paper, most of which didn't apply to his job of execution technician. What the execution technician did, really, was just press a button, or a lever. Tommy hadn't seen the machine yet. As if someone else was doing it. The laughable part was that Tommy had more technical expertise than he needed for the job. He was overqualified. The regulations seemed to be designed to divide up the job of killing the prisoner into tiny separate and distinct steps. It was like watching a child who didn't want to eat cut his meat into smaller and smaller pieces, until finally it wasn't recognizable and looked chewed, and no one noticed the child had fed the bits to the dog under the table.

Tommy's part was not the last step or even the most important one. There were the doctors whose job it was to stand by to resuscitate against the prisoner's will and to certify death. There were the people who took away the prisoner's body and disposed of the possessions. The state had decided it would not pay more than twenty-five dollars to embalm the person who was to be executed. Who decided that? The budget guys or the embalming people? Tommy tried to grasp all of the parts played, as well as his own. But his imagination balked when it came to visualizing the moment, the actual moment when the poison, the poisoned sleep medicine traveled along to deliver the fatal blow. Tommy assumed it was like being put to sleep before an operation, except that the equipment was more elaborate. But then he read somewhere it wasn't like that after all, that the person was strapped down, and squirmed or wriggled, or prayed and sang, or shouted curses, and the body convulsed. The thought made Tommy break out in a sweat. What if he got sick right in the middle of it? In spite of all the preparation.

The regulations were written in language which was opaque, impossible to penetrate. Twenty words were used to say something which could be plainly said in three. The cold words cascaded over the blue pages, falling from numbered paragraph to numbered paragraph, like cold steely water running down a steep stone gully. The person who was to be executed was called the condemned, lower case. The condemned had to have a physical and psychological test upon entry. Just like me, Tommy thought. The condemned was allowed to place daily phone calls, but could only be visited by family members or clergy from the community who presented proper clerical credentials, whatever those might be. Calls and visits by the attorney of record were allowed to the Capital Sentencing Unit (hereafter referred to as the CSU). There were capital letters for the death house, but not for its inhabitants. The tone was one of unwavering certainty, as if the regulations were issued directly from the mouth of an all knowing being.

The regulations addressed the question of the pre-execution sedative, the permitted requests for the last meal (no alcohol), and how many hours of recreation the condemned was permitted. The condemned could only have a few things in his cell, but his cell was bigger than the ordinary cells. There was a separate phone line installed for the sole purpose of receiving news of a last minute stay of the execution or a commutation. There was even a special code so that the superintendent of the prison would know the call was authentic. No incoming call on the special line reserved for the governor would be deemed authentic unless preceded by the special code. Everyone in the line of command had to learn a special code.

After the execution, the condemned was renamed the deceased and a final set of decimal numbered paragraphs concerned the disposal of the physical body and its owner's former possessions. One of the last things the prisoner did before being executed was fill out a form indicating what he wanted done with his wallet, pictures and his outside clothes. They did seem to have thought of everything. Several people must have worked it all out, probably at a committee meeting, or more likely several meetings. Although the regulations were anonymous, they were said to originate from the Standards and Management Unit (the SMU). But it didn't say the SMU would answer questions. Tommy wondered if that was where the little gray man with the rabbit mouth worked. There didn't seem to be anyone whose job it was to answer questions.

Tommy was one of the least important members of the team. There was a whole operational staff. Like the CSU and the SMU, they had their own set of capital letters. Two real doctors (they were part of the OS) had to be present to certify death, but only one was to be on the prison staff. A nurse and a certified IV therapist, whatever that was, were required to be present, as well.

The regulations also spelled out the secrecy procedures. The identity of the person actually inflicting the lethal injection was to be unknown even to the person himself. The regulations were very explicit about that. "Procedures shall be designed to insure that the

identity of those persons shall be confidential, and that the identity of the person actually inflicting the lethal substance is unknown even to the person himself." That was clear enough, wasn't it, even if it took a lot of words to say it . . . But they kept repeating that all through the training sessions. No one will know, the psychiatrist assured Tommy. No one will know who did it.

The actual room where the deed was to take place was called the execution suite, which made Tommy guffaw because it sounded like a room at a Holiday Inn. Every one around him frowned. The execution suite had to be equipped with a cardiac monitor and life support equipment and medication to revive the condemned, in case there was a last minute stay or reprieve. All of the fuss and bother about a stay or a reprieve, and how likely was that, after all. And yet another special and private telephone was installed in the execution suite in case of an emergency. Tommy had heard of midnight commutations. The governor couldn't live with the decision, so he issued a last minute pardon, if he had the power to do it. Sometimes the governor couldn't commute. So then who would use the special telephone and issue the reprieve. Tommy guessed that's why that phone was there. In fact there was a provision for three phones on the line, sequenced to receive the final call.

The technical training began with three brief sessions with one of the prison doctors. A middle-aged Japanese-American, the doctor seemed to want to get it all over as quickly as possible. With crisp efficiency the doctor explained the medical, or rather the quasi medical equipment to Tommy. After all, medical equipment was supposed to save lives, and this equipment had the opposite purpose, didn't it. So should it be called medical equipment? Actually, it was all really very simple, just a feeder line into a single intravenous line. The only medical complication was caused by the unusual length of the feeder line. It could get twisted or tangled.

The three execution technicians and the warden and two doctors and someone called the health services coordinator were required to sit in a vestibule behind a curtain, several yards behind the head of the condemned. That was the reason why the tubes and valves and hook ups were a bit tricky. Some self-appointed inventor had designed the machine. The prison doctors had no particular aptitude or enthusiasm for the job. There was a rumor one had even quit over it. The bullet proof wall separating them was thick. All the lines had to be threaded through this wall. Did someone think that a drugged man strapped down on a stretcher could start a shoot-out? Perhaps they were worried about disruptions from the other observers. Then the equipment was designed so that all three of them could simultaneously activate the injection. At the signal all three leads were to fill up at the same time, one with a lethal dose of poison, two with a harmless saline solution. The apparatus was actually rather crude, not much more complicated, and probably less efficient, than the guillotine or the hangman's drop.

Tommy couldn't understand why the condemned had to be given a sedative first. Especially since he was required to be conscious. It didn't seem to make much sense to give someone a tranquilizer, forcibly if necessary, and then insist he be awake for what came next. Especially when what came next was his own execution. Couldn't he sleep that one out?

The nisei doctor had been working for the prison for thirty years - since he graduated from the Harvard Medical School in the early fifties, at a time when Japanese-American doctors were not exactly welcome in many American hospitals. The doctor had a tic in his smooth, hairless cheek, where a dimple might have once been. Tommy wondered if the tic had developed with the job. During the training sessions Tommy had the feeling this wasn't the worst assignment this doctor had ever had. What about all those doctors who said they wouldn't take part in executions. Wasn't that why his position was created? So the doctor wouldn't have to be defrocked. Still, Tommy supposed the prison doctor would be the one giving the sedative, as well as certifying death. Tommy wondered who mixed the lethal medicine. During the training session the doctor didn't wear any prison ID. Nor did he wear the little plastic name card with his picture that Tommy and all of the other employees were required to wear when they entered the prison walls. Nor did his green hospital coat have a name stitched on the pocket. The doctor said his name hurriedly when he introduced himself at the beginning of the session. Something beginning with a T and with lots of A's and S's in between. That was as much as Tommy got. And Tommy never did have another chance to catch it.

Tommy read and reread the pages of blue regulations, which had arrived on his desk in an envelope marked CONFIDENTIAL. Although the regulations specified every detail, every moment for the procedure, something critical seemed to be missing, in spite of the specificity of the new titles, the names for all of the places and people involved. It was like the script for a play where all the players on stage were going to be hidden behind cardboard cut outs of their titles.

There was a monthly meeting with the health care supervisor (HCS) for everyone connected with what was referred to as the implementation. Tommy did have a few questions. What about the final meal? The regulations provided that the condemned could request the food of his choice at the last regularly scheduled dinner not less than eight hours before the scheduled execution. Well, it said no alcohol or beer or wine was permitted. But the food of his choice was to be provided subject to reasonable availability and cost. Tommy wanted to know what reasonable availability and cost meant. What about steak? Lobster? What about asparagus, if it was out of season. And did that regulation mean that all executions had to be at two in the morning? If the last meal was at the prison dinner hour, that was five o'clock.

The HCS frowned. So the last meal was lunch, or even breakfast? Of course not. Well, then there would be another meal after the last meal. It wasn't the last meal after all. Tommy also wanted to know why the regulations always referred to the condemned as "he"? Weren't there some women who were going to the CSU? The HCS pointed out that the regulations provided for a licensed gynecologist to examine a female condemned, and the implementation would be postponed if the condemned were pregnant. That meant the condemned could be "she," didn't it? The HCS couldn't deny the logic of that.

The HCS was a fat, kindly man who wore a frown with his uniform. He reminded Tommy of his old boss at Hogarth, the man who was embarrassed to be the one to have to explain to Tommy why they were firing him. It seemed to Tommy that he was putting the HCS on the hot seat in exactly the same way. He didn't mean to. It was just that he had all of these questions. The system seemed to be riddled with nice guys who were stuck with explaining how an impersonal abstract policy, which sounded perfectly reasonable as long as it was all in the abstract, was going to affect a very unabstract, alive, real person, maybe even someone like you or me. And

someone had to do it.

Why were two representatives from the television networks allowed in to witness the implementation if they couldn't film the event. What was the point of that? The HCS frowned at Tommy and blew smoke out of his nose like a comic book dragon. He promised to check that one out with the superintendent himself and get back to Tommy about it at the meeting next month. As if to see Tommy more clearly, he removed the cigarette from his mouth, peeling a small piece of paper from his lips as he stared at Tommy from under his frown.

The rabbit man turned out to be a kind of general administrator, although Tommy never did get straight what his title was or what he supervised. He dropped by Tommy's office every other week. Moving quickly with little abrupt gestures, he would appear unannounced at Tommy's desk. Tommy's office was halfway down a corridor leading to one of the maximum security, administrative segregation units. Not the death house, but the regular administrative segregation section, where they put ordinary prisoners for protection or punishment. Tommy's office was a subdivided square room with one tiny barred window looking out onto the parking lot. There was a yellowed shade over the window. When Tommy couldn't stand to look at the parking lot any longer, he pulled down the shade. The shade was in the habit of snapping up abruptly. With a sharp report, like a gunshot. And even though Tommy knew what it was, he jumped every time. Tommy felt as if he were crawling out from a burrow when he came out from that office. When the supervisor came to visit, he sat bolt upright with his hands on his knees in the wooden chair which was the only piece of furniture except for Tommy's regulation gray desk and chair. Once Arlette had suggested he bring in a framed picture of flowers for his office. She didn't have another place for it, and someone had given it to them. Tommy couldn't stop laughing at the idea.

"Looks like snow again," the supervisor said, not looking out the window which had its shade down, but staring around the room at the hodgepodge of junk Tommy had collected. Usually he didn't say much more than that. Just waited for Tommy to ask something. At first Tommy had lots of questions. But there never were any answers, at least not any answers which made sense. Not from the rabbit man, or the HCS with the frown, or the superintendent or anyone else. The man whose eyes were hidden, the man with the mouth which twitched like a rabbit's nose, mainly wanted to be sure that Tommy was regularly reporting to work. He posed, and then answered for himself, hypothetical questions about the pension plan, the health benefits, and all those coded deductions in Tommy's paychecks. He mentioned employee counseling. They had no conversations.

One day the supervisor paused by the messy pile of newspapers on Tommy's desk. He read out a large, black headline announcing a verdict in the latest murder trial in Gloucester county. "I wouldn't bother with that too much," the supervisor said, taking off his thick glasses and reaching for the neatly folded handkerchief in his breast pocket. It was the closest he had ever come to directly mentioning the reason why Tommy was hired. Now that his thick glasses were off Tommy saw his eyes for the first time. They were not small and slitty as Tommy imagined, but large, wide open and pale blue, almost the color of Tommy's own. The supervisor ignored Tommy's frankly curious stare - perhaps he couldn't see it - and turned his blank, pink face towards the empty dingy wall behind Tommy's head, all the while holding his thick glasses between thumb and forefinger and methodically rotating the lens inside the pristine white square of handkerchief.

In spite of the supervisor's warning Tommy did read everything he could get his hands on about murder. When a killer was sentenced to death, or executed in another state, Tommy eagerly looked for the reports of the murderer's last words of remorse, or prayer, or lack of them, before he went to join his victims. When Tommy was hired, after the death penalty had been in effect almost two years, there were still only three people on death row. The same three who had been sentenced just after Tommy had been hired were alone on death row for several months. It was as if there had been an initial flurry of activity, to show it could be done, and then everyone in the system was afraid to do it again.

Benjamin Jones was a twenty-year-old black man from Florida - the state's first death row convict wasn't even from New Jersey - who had been sentenced as a juvenile five years ago in Georgia for his role in the robbery of a gas station. His partner allegedly - Tommy snorted when they said allegedly - shot the attendant. Anyway, that was now the official version of the events since the co-defendant, whether or not he had been the shooter, had already been executed in Georgia. Jones, however, was released and drifted up to New Jersey where he committed two forthright felony murders during a spree of robberies and burglaries after forty-eight hours on coke and alcohol. The victims he was tried for were murdered in their living room. Since he denied both murders, he was convicted on the basis of circumstantial evidence. In his case, the fact that he was found driving around in one of the victim's cars while trying to forge a signature on her credit card proved persuasive to the jury, especially in the face of his surly silence. Killing more than one person at the same time was the basis for the death penalty.

The second man, Darby Ross, was a slight white man in his mid-thirties with a wispy, elfin beard. His pale face reminded Tommy of someone, but Tommy couldn't catch who it was. The memory would flicker across his consciousness, a shadow, and then be gone. Someone on an opposing team from his baseball days? The large runny-nosed boy who sat behind him in fifth grade? Darby had been linked to the murder of fifteen young girls, young women who were picked up on the boardwalk or lured into his car from supermarket parking lots. Darby taped his arm in a sling and pretended to need help. All the women were sadistically tortured and raped in a satanic, drug-heightened ritual before being murdered. The evidence was circumstantial, and there was lots of it. One odd circumstance was half the victims were black and half were white. The circumstances were all similar. For the moment he had only been convicted of murder for two of the white teenagers who disappeared in Atlantic City. Charges were pending against him in other counties. As far as Tommy was concerned, either one of the two would have been suitable candidates for his newly acquired skills.

Gregory Griselli, the third man, was a diminutive druggist in his forties who had paid someone to kill his wife. He hadn't even been a suspect at first, he wept so convincingly at the funeral, but the actual strangler gave a very convincing confession which included details of Gregory coming to meet him at a garage on a particular night with several thousand dollars in grocery bags. Everyone wondered why Griselli couldn't just find some way of poisoning her using the stocks in his pharmacy. Gregory refused to speak to anyone after his sentence was imposed. The court appointed a public defender appellate lawyer for him against his wishes. Gregory

let the private lawyers who were so eager to represent him at trial go hang for their fees after he was convicted. He didn't take the stand to contradict the evidence against him, although he had no criminal record. But he didn't think that the evidence made him guilty. Tommy felt sorry for the kids, two boys, eight and ten, who had to look at their father and know he killed their mother. They changed their names and went to live with the maternal grandparents.

Once as he trotted down the slippery cement corridor of the prison Tommy saw walking towards him the heavy set, older man, the man holding the straw boater, who had been waiting outside in the corridor on that hot day in August when Tommy went for his interview. Neither Tommy nor the older man, he had a pleasant face with thinning hair on top, exchanged any sign of recognition. He looked like a man who had seen some reversals in his life. Tommy wondered what kind of job he had before, and whether the supervisor wondered if he was too old for the job.

At Sunday dinners with Gloria, George and Uncle Mike, Tommy found himself talking excitedly about the latest murder trial. Last Sunday Arlette looked up from the corner of the living room where she and Gloria were sifting through the wedding proofs. "Oh, I wish he wouldn't talk about that all the time," Arlette whispered to Gloria. "The cops should just kill them and save the taxpayers the trouble."

"Now, that's really good of both of you," Gloria said, holding up a shot of Arlette pursing her brilliant red mouth over the dark wedding cake Tommy was feeding her, so that she seemed to be kissing his fingers. "Don't pay any attention," Gloria whispered, as she wrote "enlarge" on the back of the proof. To Tommy she said, half laughing, "Leave that stuff at the office. You're upsetting your wife, and she's in a delicate condition."

George and Uncle Mike listened to Tommy, not the way Tommy's friend Anthony might have listened, but they listened. Every week the newspapers and the television had a new one. The crimes came so fast and furiously it was hard to remember the murders from just a few months ago. The trials of Darby and Benjamin, dragged on for weeks, monopolizing most of the front and back of the local papers every day, with pictures of the crime scene, blood, disarray, signs of violence, but no person there. Only the back of a uniformed policeman or emergency medical assistant. It was like looking at your own death scene. Then no sooner did the public finish clucking over the victims' fates than the stories turned to the murderer's unfortunate family history.

Benjamin took the stand to describe how he'd been beaten with a golf club by his step father and then left to fend for himself as age eleven. He didn't attend school after fifth grade, and he never did learn to read. His mother was ranting crazy. Then he went on to say his family was just like all others. They had the same problems that all families had. This after two days of expert testimony that his treatment in childhood would have made a gerbil pathological. The jury regretfully sentenced him to death. They saw no hope. Then silence. Probably many newspaper readers thought he had been executed already.

No sooner had Darby and Benjamin and Griselli been sentenced to die, but Arthur Davenport from Bridgetown shot his wife in the head and then strangled four of his five children, one right after another, as they huddled in the corner weeping. The fifth child ran outside and saw more than any child should witness. The father planned to kill himself, but didn't, collapsed sobbing instead, and asked the state to do the job.

"Ah," Mike said. "He'll get off. Even if they give it to him. It'll be overturned. For some damned reason you've never heard of. I tell you what I'd do," Mike picked up one of Gloria's white napkins, held it lengthwise and turned it into the coil of a rope. Then he wrapped the napkin around his hands and twisted. "Bastards."

"No you wouldn't," Tommy protested. "If you really had the chance." He didn't know why he said that.

"You're both giving me a stomach ache," Gloria said, and went into the kitchen.

Arthur Davenport, the man from Bridgetown, was an accountant. He hired a fancy lawyer from New York City who, it was rumored, had sold the rights to a book about the case for half a million dollars. The defense was temporary insanity - he heard voices, the doctors said. But it took the jury less than three hours to find Davenport guilty on four counts of capital murder and one count of manslaughter. Since the wife had been holding the baby when she was shot, and the baby was first dropped on its head, the jury found manslaughter for the death of the baby. Another half a day, and the jury sentenced him to death, although the doctor who testified he was crazy was very sincere and took no fee. Tommy was impressed, but probably that was a negative with the jury. So Davenport joined Darby, Griselli and Benjamin on death row to make four, three white men, one black man, and the victims, black and white, men and women and children.

"Well," Tommy said to Ants, "that's one they'll never get overturned. He said right out he killed all of them. Never denied it."

Anthony nodded. He was singularly uninterested in this particular case, or in Tommy's other horror stories.

"Look," Tommy insisted. A pleading note crept into his voice. "That guy is as sane as. . ."

Ants laughed. "As you, maybe! Come on . . . It's all crazy!" And Ants walked out of the room, leaving Tommy alone with his unfinished sentence.

The local prosecutor was finally moving along the case against the two kids charged with the assault upon George and his partner. Even though it was over a year later, George was still limping when he went to the prosecutor's office to go over his statement one more time.

"One wore a mask," George said to Tommy. "At the line up I wasn't sure. But my partner picked him right out. It must be the right ones." Turned out the two punks - neither of them had ever worked a day in his life - were out on bail and waiting trial on an almost identical robbery in another town when George and his partner were attacked. They didn't get much from that robbery either. Nor had they learned anything from being in jail. The judge let them out because they were supposed to be in school, and because no one had been seriously hurt. But one of the men went on disability because he was afraid to come back to work. George kept asking Mike what he thought would happen this time.

"Don't tell your Dad," Uncle Mike said in a whisper when Tommy asked the same question, "but the case will plead out. They'll probably get time served." Apparently the evidence wasn't considered particularly strong, in spite of the identification by both George and his partner and some marked bills. The two kids claimed to be elsewhere, home asleep in their beds like good boys.

"Punks," Mike said. "Besides, the prosecutor took one look at your dad and saw that he'd be a terrible witness." According to Mike the prosecutor could tell George would be shaky on the stand, that he would waver on the identification. The kids themselves would not be witnesses. They both had arrests and a couple of convictions, although neither one was twenty-one yet.

"But why?" Tommy asked again. How could anyone not believe and trust his father, or at least feel sorry for him. The more Tommy read about lawyers, the picky little rules, the court formalities, and most of all about how long everything took, the less sense any of it made. The prosecutors would hang a desperate man who stole a loaf of bread to feed his starving children, and the defense attorneys would ask the jury to recommend the most rabid mass murderer for outpatient psychiatric counseling. The judges fell asleep on the bench, or didn't understand the arguments, and the police shot twelve-year-old kids in the back when they ran down the city alleys. Meanwhile those on bail or on parole, or awaiting trial, went on crime sprees as if violence was about to go out of style. And that didn't seem too likely. Or maybe it was just their last chance. Reading the daily newspapers could make a law abiding citizen want to round up his own neighborhood lynch mob. Finally, Tommy just concentrated upon the crimes themselves - weren't they horrible enough to justify any kind of punishment? Who cared how the defendants got to the execution suite, or when they had their last meal, or what it all cost.

Alone in his little cinder block office with its limited view of the facility parking lot, Tommy nodded in agreement when he read that a state legislator said death by injection was too good for someone who tortured and murdered fifteen women. Who cared about some technical question on jury selection which no one, not even the lawyers, seemed to understand anyway. So what if the fifteen-year-old he was actually convicted of murdering had been arrested with marijuana a couple of years ago. Tommy knew how phony that could be. Did that mean it was all right to kill her? And like that, too. There ought to be something you could do to a guy who did that. Killing him was too good for him.

The stunned parents were interviewed mercilessly on television by a reporter who looked not much older than their dead daughter. The father stared into the camera with large, blank eyes and said their daughter had run away from home, and they hadn't heard anything from her in over a year. The mother couldn't speak. Her voice had disappeared into the empty space where her heart once was. She periodically bobbed her head as if she agreed with whatever her husband or anyone else said. A school psychologist was quoted as saying the victim had been withdrawn in school, skipping classes to hang out in video game parlors. The psychologist suspected problems at home. Hard to persuade kids these days that it's worth their while to learn to write their names, let alone learn to read, was the psychologist's unsolicited opinion. The girl's body had been dumped in the pine barrens. She was identified by her slightly overlapping front teeth.

The merciless reporters interviewed the girl's dentist, too. His bulgy eyes filled up with tears when he talked about her back molars. The prosecutor's office had lost the autopsy report on another one of the victims, and the parents had insisted upon a cremation, so they didn't bother prosecuting that one. At least those parents didn't have to be interviewed over and over.

Darby himself loved to give interviews. He adored the press. He managed to outsmart the prison phone security system, getting calls out to the reporters about once a week. Darby was eloquent on the subject of the injustices of the present criminal justice system in comparison to the majesty of the promises in the Bill of Rights. He vowed to fight his appeals until all his unconstitutional convictions were put aside. He never indicated remorse, or admitted any role in the killings of the women, even when eyewitnesses came out of the woodwork to testify against him. As far as he was concerned, it was a case of mistaken identification. The wrong man had been convicted.

While all of this was going on Benjamin, who had an IQ of 80, had discovered that a weeping black Jesus stared back at him from the stippled gray cinder block of his cell every night promptly at five, just before his dinner was pushed through the slot. Strangely, Jesus used the same brand of barely coherent speech which was now Benjamin's signature. The weeping Jesus absolved Benjamin for his sins with communications so ungrammatical only Benjamin could understand them.

Benjamin now said that he deserved to die and was willing to die because God had forgiven him. His three government lawyers devoted themselves even more vigorously to the fight to save his life over his objection, arguing among other things that Benjamin was obviously incompetent to make the decision to die now, although a court had already decided he was mentally capable of committing murder and deserved the state's highest punishment. The lawyers argued it was immoral for the state to execute someone so crazy he didn't understand what was happening to him. Besides the point of the death penalty was that the person who got it had no say about when it would happen. The state decided for you. That was the point. You didn't control your own death.

In the meantime, in a southern county, the jury had been out four days on a case involving a young man who was a straight-A student in high school, the son of a stockbroker, who strangled his pregnant girlfriend, or fiancee, and dumped her body in the town reservoir. At trial he took the stand and protested his innocence, but there were rumors a confession had been suppressed. He had an alibi, but some of her things, a numbered rugby jersey, her make-up kit, had been found in his red sports car, a birthday present from his dad.

He admitted they had been together and in the car, but he said it was the day before. Then it was said he had been selling speed and the girlfriend was going to tell the school authorities, or his father. Her best friend had seen the two of them in his car on the day determined to be the day of the murder. When the prosecutor held up the rugby shirt, the witness said, yes, the victim had been wearing it. She cried on the stand. Tommy didn't understand why people didn't want to talk about these things.

Gloria was passing a breast of roast chicken to Tommy and barely listening when Tommy asked her if she thought the stockbroker's son did it. "What? . . ." She looked at Tommy and her puzzled expression was glazed with a golden, slightly greasy sweat.

"I do," Arlette interjected hotly. "How could he? She was pregnant with their child. He deserves whatever he gets."

Tommy impatiently started to tell the whole story again, the witness, the alibi, the numbered rugby shirt, the tears.

Gloria interrupted him. "I don't know . . . about this job." She put the platter down and looked at Tommy with disconcerting directness. "It's all so wrong. And no one stops it." Hearing her voice trail off like that, Tommy was reminded of the time right after graduation, when he just stayed in his room all day. Gloria used to climb the three flights of stairs to his attic room and then just stare, first at him - lying on the bed with his headset on - then at the clothes, records, tapes, and athletic equipment strewn all over. She'd open her mouth, take a deep breath, and then either say something completely matter of fact, like telling him the time, or go back downstairs without a word. Then one morning Tommy just got out of bed and left home.

"I just don't know, except that it's upsetting your wife . . ." Gloria said now, wiping her hands on her napkin. "Those awful people. Something has to be done." She handed Tommy the butter in its covered silver dish and tilted her head towards George. "It isn't right, " she said. Tommy, balancing the slippery butter dish in his hand, winced as he looked at his father, eating slowly with his head down, seeming not to hear the conversation. He did not meet his mother's questioning gaze.

V

It is Friday, the thirteenth of April. In 1984 there are three Fridays the thirteenth, and this is the second. Tommy is up at six in the morning, as usual. He cannot sleep past six in the morning these days, no matter what time he goes to bed at night. Arlette is three months pregnant and snoring lightly, her lips trembling with the exhalation of each breath. At least I know she's alive, Tommy thinks gratefully. Recently he has been waking up in the middle of the night terrified that something has happened to Arlette. Wide awake he simply lies rigid next to her waiting for the sweet music of her breathing. Now Tommy curls against her and hopes to catch her sleep. Her mouth is open, the red threads of yesterday's lipstick fluttering with each breath.

Since the pregnancy Tommy has taken to getting up first. He goes to the kitchen, puts the water on to boil and drops a piece of whole wheat toast in the toaster's gaping mouth. He smiles to himself, thinking of Ants and his other roommate kidding him about how hopeless he was in the kitchen. Ants, not surprisingly, was an excellent cook. If Arlette immediately eats a piece of dry toast, while propped up on one elbow on the flowered pillow, while sipping a cup of hot tea, while staring gratefully and groggily at Tommy, if she can get down the toast and a couple of swallows of tea, before putting her bare feet flat on the carpet, then she is less likely to vomit for an hour in the bathroom. Tommy never anticipated the violence of pregnancy, and every time she lurches out of bed retching and runs to the bathroom, it is a slap of surprise. Of course he knew where babies came from. And even he had heard about morning sickness. But to see his own Arlette gagging as she got out of bed in the morning because a baby had seized control of her body was another matter altogether.

While Tommy waits for the kettle to boil, makes himself a cup of instant coffee, all he takes for breakfast these days, gingerly he approaches the morning headlines. An unemployed janitor beat to death an emergency room nurse as she left the hospital at two in the morning. The twenty-two-year-old nurse had been working overtime to save the life of a suicidal teenager overdosed on her mother's sleeping pills. The apprehended man had bundled up her bloodstained clothes and dumped them in the garbage in front of his rooming house, where the smell of blood was noticed by the landlord as he put the cans out on the curb.

The nurse was a local girl, a few classes behind Tommy in the high school. The newspaper printed her picture from the high school yearbook on the front page. The portrait of the hopeful graduate, her hair softly curled around her neck, the whole head and bare shoulders set off by the black velvet photographer's drape, cannot be reconciled with the newspaper's graphic, almost gleeful, description of the acts committed upon her head and body prior to death. The photographer's black velvet wrap is echoed in a black border around the picture. Tommy's hands start to shake. Arlette knew the woman, even had an English class with her. Arlette must not see this picture, especially early in the morning. He will call Gloria from work and make sure that she doesn't mention anything.

The springs creak and Tommy hears Arlette padding solidly to the bathroom. He lays the paper face down on the kitchen table. Arlette comes into the kitchen wearing a furry yellow robe with a pink tulip embroidered on the collar. The robe was a present from her office. Every time she talks to one of the secretaries she mentions how often that she wears it, and if she is wearing it right now. Tommy wants her to hurry back to bed now so that he can bring her breakfast. Arlette is smiling which means she hasn't been sick. Tommy pulls her down onto his lap and kisses her sleep stiff hair and slightly sour neck. Her spicy smell prickles his nose. Tommy takes a deep breath and holds it, as if he were inhaling the fragrance of a rose. Arlette leans back, yawns and closes her eyes, and Tommy slides the paper under his chair. He slips his hands inside the fuzzy robe and spreads his fingers over the little round bump on the top of her fiat stomach. So far only Arlette has felt anything, although Tommy comes and puts his hand on her stomach, reaching under her dress if they are alone, when he sees her attention drift inward. He has not yet felt the quickening of his child.

"Too early for him to be up," Arlette says, curling her feet beneath her on Tommy's lap. She assumes she will have a boy because that is what most of the relatives want. She's grown prettier with the pregnancy. Not like some women, Tommy thinks proudly, who get mottled and lumpy with the hormonal changes. Her olive skin has darkened, especially around the eyes, but it is translucent,

delicate. It is as if her complexion has moved over three hues in the color spectrum. Now Arlette looks Moroccan or Cuban, instead of what she is, a dark southern Italian. By the end of the pregnancy she will have huge, blue-black shadows under her eyes. Troy waving lines, like the inky tracery of a river system seen from the air, have appeared on the sandy inside of her thighs.

Arlette, who could not sit still for a three hour movie, now sometimes sleeps until Tommy comes home. Arlette who used to be busier than all the bees, who went to work and then stayed up half the night talking or dancing, now just waits for him to come home. Occasionally she goes out to do an errand, but mostly she just waits until it is time to start their dinner. He is the reason for this altered state, and it only makes sense when he is there. Tommy also feels his existence in suspension while away from her. It was not that they were so close, in fact they talk little these days. It was that they had turned into one person, with another person growing somewhere inside them. Those few times when they quarreled, it was like having an argument with yourself or getting mad at yourself. And the quarrels were so half-hearted neither one bothered to finish them. What were they about, after all?

Now that Tommy had been moved inside the prison walls no one seemed to care whether he stayed in his office, as long as he clocked in at the beginning of the working day and was conspicuously present between four and five in the afternoon before punching out. Calls from the superintendent or visits from the supervisor came either at nine thirty or at four in the afternoon. Since the center of his working day was uninterrupted, Tommy started going to court. At first he asked permission, then since no one seemed to care, he just went. There were trials every day, and almost every week a murder trial was in process. Soon Tommy was one of the courthouse regulars along with the stooped pensioners who couldn't stand to stay at home, the reporters with their notebooks, the sketch artists, and the occasional high school class which traipsed in on a civics assignment.

The courthouse corridor regulars always knew how far along the latest rape trial was, when the victim would take the stand, and when a capital murder was scheduled for penalty phase, when you could watch the jury deciding life or death. Penalty phase was usually the only time the defendants stood up and spoke for themselves. The rape cases drew bigger audiences than the murders, perhaps because the surviving victim was there to see, often displaying her scars. The shame of living on afterwards, of telling a husband or boyfriend, of having to recount the acts imposed in foreign, legal language, sometimes the victims seemed to choke again on the deeds, or the words. The suffering was still alive to be witnessed.

Tommy strained to hear what the lawyers said to the judge. Sometimes the lawyers huddled on one side of the bench, with the judge standing over the raised platform with his head bent over, and they all conferred in hushed voices, the incantations of a cabal. In these secret conferences the lawyers and the judge spoke over the blinking court reporter, her head bent forward like a daffodil, straddling the spindle-legged transcribing machine as if it were a runaway rocking horse. The defendants, incongruous in suits and ties, sat stiffbacked to the audience, letting their lawyers plead for mercy. Tommy didn't understand what the lawyers were doing. The judge sent the jury out of the room during these discussions, and Tommy knew, he just knew the lawyers were lying most of the time. Both sides were lying. And the judge was lying, too. They were lying as surely as the defendant was lying by wearing a brand new three-piece suit, when his normal clothing was the grimy leather jacket covered with the victim's blood which the prosecutor held up for the jury to see.

Tommy saw three days of the trial of Johnson Dennis Johnson who was being tried for the murder, rape and kidnapping of Dolores Evan, fourteen, his landlord's stepdaughter. Two witnesses testified that Johnson was seen with her in his car on the last night she was alive, three days before her body was found in what the newspapers referred to as a wooded area, but was really a decorative band of shrubs at the border of the interstate. It took the jury two days to find Johnson guilty of murder, mostly on the evidence of pictures of his face with scratches on it soon after the murder, and hair and fiber samples taken from his car.

Johnson's mother and his nineteen-year-old sister - the family had emigrated from the Dominican Republic ten years earlier - testified that he had been in the house watching television with them at the time that the pathologist estimated the murder took place. Perhaps it was that the mother and sister remembered a little too clearly what programs were on the television that night, exactly what episode, what the characters did, as if they had been told to watch a rerun. Or as if they had been studying the TV Guide.

At penalty phase Johnson told the jury not to spare his life if they believed he did the terrible things done to that girl. "Because then I ought to die," he said. "And if you think I'm capable of that now, think what I'll be like after thirty years in prison. So just have it over and done with." The jury was out for five days.

There was only physical evidence, circumstantial evidence. The court watchers agreed that there were few features of Johnson's life that made it worth saving. Johnson, a frail young man, sat quietly throughout, seemingly impervious to the presence in the front row of the devastated woman who was the victim's mother. As Tommy remarked to the retired gym teacher, "It's hard to imagine him doing all that, isn't it?"

The school teacher pulled her hand knit cardigan around her shoulders. "To raise a child for that," she said, shaking her head.

A man with a ribbon of scar which ran down his cheek and into his shirt collar, closed his tobacco-stained fingers. "I know what I would have done if I'd been in that jury room."

The school teacher nodded in agreement. "Send him back where he came from."

The jurors were opaque. Tommy watched the large black woman who was the foreperson in Johnson's case. Her eyes went from the judge to the lawyers to the defendant, without a blink or change in expression. Next to her a young man with a scraggly beard, he looked like a college student, was having difficulty keeping awake. As the trial progressed the juror next to him, a pleasant-looking older woman would nudge him awake, or cough, just as he was dropping off. A woman who looked about six months pregnant was also having trouble keeping awake through the testimony on fibers, wounds and time of death. By the end of the trial you could tell

who had become friends, who disliked whom, after the long hours when they were locked in together deliberating.

The defense psychiatrist put several people into a trance with his testimony about the defendant's head injuries which were supposed to have something to do with his mental capacity. Why were those scans and information about temporal lobes even relevant? What did cranium damage have to do with a fourteen-year-old being dragged into a car and then beaten to death with a hammer? By the time the trial was over, the word murder would probably induce a yawn from every one of the twelve jurors.

They listened as a defense social worker from New York testified that Johnson had been sexually abused. Then they listened equally respectfully to a teacher who said that Johnson beat up younger students and was known to carry brass knuckles. Johnson occasionally leaned over to ask his lawyers a question.

Throughout the trial Johnson's mother sat in the first row, a little black lady of indeterminate age. Her gray hair lay in ribs which looked ironed onto her head. Johnson was her last child before she'd had her innards out, as she put it. The defense psychiatrist said that all of Johnson's aggressive behavior was because he hated her. How could anyone hate a skinny black lady who fed her children by cleaning office buildings at night? When the prosecutor cross-examined her, she said, "Yes sir," to every question. And when the defense attorney asked her questions, she said, "Yes sir," to him, too, even though that answer was now the exact opposite to what she had said previously. Johnson's mother also said that everything was in the Lord's hands now. She had done the best she could. When she was on the stand, Johnson's mother looked at him as if he was a bad boy who needed a licking. She didn't seem particularly mad at him.

The prosecution psychiatrist had enough anger for everyone in the courtroom. He called Johnson a sociopath, an emotionally stunted human being, someone who had never done a kind or considerate or courteous thing that anyone could remember, that he was worse than an animal. The defense psychiatrist emphasized his bleak childhood, the beatings and sexual abuse by the stepfather, which Johnson's mother couldn't remember, but she said might have happened, since she was away from home working most nights, and the fact that Johnson left school in fourth grade because he was termed incorrigible. Johnson's mother seemed offended by this recharacterization of his childhood. Johnson had tested very high on some intelligence tests although he barely passed from one grade to the next. The defense psychiatrist said that the term sociopath had been discredited in the profession and didn't mean anything. The prosecution replied, discredited or not, a sociopath was what the jury saw before them. The jury didn't seem to understand or care much very much about the debate in the professional literature. The defense attorney said his client was like a sick, dumb animal, but not evil. And Tommy thought, we know what we do with sick, dumb animals: Put them out of their misery. Put them to sleep.

Tommy missed the final day of penalty phase because a meeting had been called by the health care supervisor. When he came back, the jury had been sent home after returning a verdict of death. The next morning Tommy read that Johnson laughed and laughed for hours back in his cell. The jurors said in post verdict interviews that most of them favored death from the first day, but one juror held out for five days.

Tommy wished he could talk to Ants about these things. He even wanted to tell Ants - first swearing him to secrecy, which they used to do for girls, or cars, or money - about the true nature of his job. But Anthony was undergoing his own metamorphosis. He had fallen in love. With Julia, the daughter of a wealthy tax lawyer from Princeton. Ants was in no mood to listen. Anthony's mother called Tommy to tell him how bad it was. "Slumming," was the word Anthony's mother used, spitting out her disgust. "She's just slumming with a Pollack from Trenton." Tommy was shocked that Ants mother would say that about her own son.

Whatever the girl's intentions Ants hardly came around anymore. He let his hair grow, rode a motorcycle, and was a foreigner when he peeled around the corner onto Tommy and Arlette's quiet street. Arlette just stared and stared at Julia who came without lipstick and seemed to have no interest in clothes, although her very pale jeans sported a designer label. The fascination was mutual. Julia couldn't take her eyes off of Arlette's distended stomach and bloated face. They were, after all, the same age. From her pregnancy torpor Arlette looked at Julia's pink and white complexion with envy. Even in blue jeans, there was nothing haphazard about this young woman. Her hair was the color of white honey, with pale flecks in it. Arlette told Tommy with an edge to her voice that such color didn't happen by itself. When Julia spoke, her voice was low and firm, each syllable clear as a school bell.

Tommy thought she had a figure to knock your eyes out. But she had a lot of silly ideas and plenty to say for herself, unasked. She had ideas about the United Nations and the President and foreign policy. And crime and lawyers, too. Listening to this confident voice emerging from such a pretty mouth, Tommy could see why Ants was in love with her. She felt sorry for prisoners, whose lives might have been straightened out by a child guidance counselor. Tommy certainly didn't believe that, and he contradicted her hotly. But it upset both Ants and Arlette when they argued. Ants had only known her for a year. Was a year of being in love a reason not to see your best friend? But Ants just didn't seem to want to come spend Saturday with Tommy, doing what they used to do, anything or nothing.

During the few hours when Arlette is not ministering to her pregnant body's incessant demands for food or sleep, she and Tommy are silent together, communicating with gestures. Tommy senses he can't reach her. It is as if she has disappeared deep inside herself, as if her whole self has wrapped itself around the creature growing inside of her. She hears what Tommy says, but she is only listening to the tiny being. Tommy stares at her puffy face and rounded belly with its bouncing cheerful mound of pubic hair and is happy if she is not feeling nauseous or exhausted.

Recently Arlette has become afraid to be alone in the house at night. In the evening they curl up under the comforter and watch movies on their tiny television. Arlette refuses to see anything with blood or violence. Her favorites are the melodramas, and she cries and laughs, even when she has seen the film before. It is as if the pregnancy - something they started together - has thrown up a wall between them and around them. The pregnancy, a simple bodily function, has transported Arlette's spirit into a realm where Tommy

cannot follow. Tommy stands at the gate waiting for her to return. When he is not with her he feels fiercely protective. He restrains himself from calling home in the middle of the day. And when they venture outside Tommy positions himself to shield the round bump where the baby is swimming in wait.

The county prosecutor hadn't even bothered to inform George and his partner that the case against their two assailants had been concluded. Tommy heard by chance that the kids were scheduled for sentencing. George got dressed in a suit and tie, and he and Tommy sat for hours waiting for the case to be called. George asked his partner if he wanted to come, but he was already back at work. "You're better off forgetting all that," he told George. "You'll never get satisfaction there."

Finally, after listening to the incomprehensible legalese, George had just told Tommy he was ready to go home, when the judge announced their case. The defendants both entered pleas to aggravated assault. The audience in the courtroom was very grave when the two boys - they seemed shockingly young - were escorted into the court with an armed guard in shackles. A woman in the front row, Tommy assumed it was one of the mother's, buried her head in a blue Kleenex. Before the judge pronounced sentence, he delivered a lecture about the importance of setting an example. The two boys stood with their heads bowed and said nothing. But the fact was the kids would be out on the street again in six months.

As they filed out of the courtroom, their chains clanking, George caught the eye of the taller one. "Did you see that?" George's voice was shaking. "He recognized me."

"How do you know?" Tommy asked, leaning forward. George's voice carried over the coming and goings of defendants and lawyers.

The uniformed bailiff frowned and leaned over to silence George with a tap on the shoulder. The next case had started. A new group of defendants and lawyers stood up below the judge who stifled a yawn.

"I don't want to hear about it," Gloria said when they came home. It made her sick to her stomach to think of those kids getting out. "And you . . ." she said accusingly to Tommy, "the taxpayers pay you to take care of the . . ." Then, under her breath, she said ". . . bastards."

Tommy was so surprised to hear his mother swear that the unformed accusation against himself didn't register. Besides Tommy's two cousins were at the house and they wanted to talk football.

"I can't believe your mother said 'bastards,'" Arlette said. Arlette spends hours on the phone talking to Gloria. Once Gloria hinted that her son could have done better than to marry a neighborhood girl with no college, but now Arlette is the daughter she never had. At first Gloria didn't want Tommy to know, but Arlette got it out of her. Gloria had gone to the doctor. It wasn't certain, yet. They were still doing tests.

Tests? What kind of tests, Tommy asked. But Arlette just said they were doing tests - female tests. Tommy could tell when Arlette was talking to Gloria about medical things because she'd pull the phone receiver around the corner, go into the tiny closet and close the door. She talked from among the raincoats and jackets while only the curled blue phone cord emerged from inside the closet. Neither of them would tell Tommy anything, so he walked out onto their small back porch and stared at the metal door of the garage. The inside was jammed with half empty paint cans, splintered lumber, and a broken power mower. Its dull tarpaper roof became a source of glory during the week when the purple magnolia tree bloomed and its flowers were draped across it.

Mr. Russo next door often greeted Tommy by asking Tommy if he had a nice day. Tommy remembered the gentle purple and white tulip blossoms carelessly releasing their faint perfume into the cluttered yard. Tommy couldn't remember if it had been a nice day or not. He'd been inside all day, first at the office, then at the courthouse. The summer fragrance of the river reminded Tommy of how much he hated being indoors.

Tommy was surprised Arlette didn't seem to miss her job. Bending over with laughter, until he had to laugh too, Arlette used to tell Tommy and Gloria how the secretaries called and pretended to be a collection agency when they wanted the clients to pay their legal bills, and the outrageous lies they told to cover up for the lawyers when they couldn't be found. No, Arlette didn't seem to miss any of it. Arlette who was always grabbing your hand and pulling it, saying look at that, now didn't seem to need anybody or want to do anything. Arlette who jumped up a half dozen times during dinner, until an exasperated Gloria would command her to sit still, was now happy to stare lazily at the television all evening, eating rocky road ice cream from the carton Tommy had picked up for her on the way home. Arlette said the ice cream tasted bad when it was kept in the freezer for even a single day, so Tommy brought home a fresh pint every day.

Tommy thought it tasted fine when he finished off the rest of it at two in the morning as he sat in the semi-dark living room in front of the television with the sound off. In the middle of the night Tommy's dreams frequently startled him. He sat up with his teeth clenched and his neck in a vise, after drifting off to sleep curled against Arlette's side, his arms thrown across her stomach. At midnight his eyes snapped open, the lids rolling up as tight as the sprung window shade in his office.

In his dreams, Darby merged with Dr. Smyth, his friendly, white-haired physician. Or, Anthony was a prisoner at the CSU, trying to call Tommy over to his cell when they both knew Tommy couldn't talk to prisoners while he was on duty. Once in his dreams Julia came to him. Then Tommy was put in the embarrassing position of telling Anthony to be quiet, of hiding their friendship, of pretending they didn't recognize each other. In the dream Anthony hardly spoke any English, was no more comprehensible than Benjamin, and Tommy was always laboriously keeping the CSU daily log. Frequently what he was writing was incomprehensible, even to himself, as strange as Chinese ideographs. Or, Tommy was swimming away from the CSU, towards his coffin-like office, or down the gray green basement corridor to room B1309, where in his dreams, the rabbit had his permanent den under water.

These dreams caused Tommy to leave the sighing, sleep-sour body of his pregnant wife. He padded the few yards into the boxy living room. There he stared away his nightmares by watching a screen filled with silent, flickering figures of a manageable dimension, who then blended with and blotted out the images in his dreams and the replay of the day's events in his mind's eye.

VI

The fat priest, he wasn't much older than Tommy, walked down the aisle in front of the casket, swinging the smoldering incense, chanting the prayers, loudly. Almost embarrassingly loudly, Tommy thought. Tommy stood beside the first pew of the small Catholic church with Gloria, Arlette, now obviously and awkwardly pregnant, and George, who wore a rented black suit under protest. Gloria threw up her hands and begged Tommy to talk to him. It had been - just like that - Gloria told everyone. No sickness. No warning. Uncle Mike had just dropped dead of a heart attack. Not really dropped dead. But fallen over. In his car, on the street. He was found by one of his old buddies on the force, responding to an anonymous caller who had noticed a new Cadillac stalled in the middle of the street with the driver slumped over the wheel. The policeman approached with his gun drawn, and then put it away sadly. When a uniformed officer arrived at Gloria's door at four o'clock on Saturday, Gloria's voice rose and rose, calling George. She thought, it must be Tommy. Something had happened to Tommy or Arlette. George was struck dumb. It was another unanticipated body blow.

The funeral came at the end of three days of people. People at Gloria's house. People sitting on folding chairs at the funeral home. People eating, people drinking, people smoking, and people laughing. Gloria cried and cried, until she had no more tears, then she was transported back to an earlier time, and Tommy was shocked to hear her laughter, curiously transformed into a mirthless sound. That was the strangest part. It was a party. Neighbors and cousins who hadn't seen one another in years caught up with each other's lives. For the first time in his memory Tommy felt he was not in the forefront of his mother's consciousness. She had gone somewhere else to grieve, back to the time before he was born.

Members of the force who had retired or moved came to talk about the changes - none of them good - which had taken place since the new chief took over. These police officers loved each other and Mike. They all flirted with Gloria and one seemed to be an old flame. Men Tommy didn't know came and threw their arms around him. When Tommy said he worked in the prison, these men nodded. At least you aren't a lawyer, one said. Maybe they thought he was a lawyer because he was wearing his wedding suit, the one dark suit he owned. One thing was clear they all regarded him as the man in the house now.

The women embraced him and searched his face tearfully. Uncle Mike had never married, and he used to say Gloria and George and Tommy were his only family, but it turned out he had several lady friends. They all knew who Tommy was and about Arlette and the baby. Tommy embraced their unfamiliar bodies mechanically, without quite getting their names. Funny, Mike never mentioning any of them.

The little Trenton church had new stained glass windows. Tommy hadn't been inside the church for years in spite of, or perhaps because of, Gloria's protestations. Tommy remembered the church as dark, but now celebrating his uncle's death the church was flooded with light. The blues and reds and yellows of the new stained glass pictures were bright as cartoon colors. Surrounding them the plaster was white, as shiny and white as the priest's surplice. Two altar boys, one blond and one dark, swung the incense behind the priest. They were more angelic than the blunt featured women with heavy, gauze-covered arms who were pictured as guarding heaven.

Gloria picked out an expensive casket, a heavy silver-gray model, which bore a stylistic resemblance to Mike's Cadillac, Tommy thought. George said it was ridiculous to spend thousands of dollars on a box which was going in the ground. Gloria said, fine, she'd spend her own savings for it. Tommy had never heard them fight, and he didn't know Gloria had her own money. Then it turned out that Mike had a policeman's burial policy which paid for the casket, the funeral and everything. The heavy casket sat up high on its rubber wheeled cart, covered with a white silk cloth with a gold embroidered cross throughout the ceremony. The white and gold cloth dropped ceremoniously to the floor in heavy folds, like the stone drapery on a graveyard statute.

Flowers were banked at both sides of the altar. Most prominent was a large blue and white wreath in the shape of a policeman's badge with Mike's number, 1010, in blue carnations at the center. Throughout the chanting, the raising and lowering of the chalice, the taking of the wafer on the tongue, the drinking of the blood, the wiping away of the human touch with a white satin cloth, Tommy kept glancing over at the blue and white badge made out of flowers. The wreath was propped on an easel, so that it was level with the altar. So that was what being a cop came down to, a corny wreath at your funeral with your number on it.

Tommy and the other five pallbearers lifted the silver and gray casket on their shoulders and placed it gently on the red extended tongue of carpet from the hearse, then stood silently as it was withdrawn. Tommy shivered as the coffin slid onto the red carpet. The shield of flowers followed in its own separate limousine, ahead of the family.

In June of 1984 the newspapers seemed to carry more than the usual quantum of greed, misery and suffering. The averted faces of American boy soldiers, their shoulders weighed down with expensive weaponry, stared blankly out of the front page from the camera flattened backdrop of jungle. They looked bewildered, reluctant killers who wished they were watching the war on television.

At home the most recent murder involved a young Hispanic, Enrico Ruiz, who kidnapped a couple of white teenagers parked near a lake. Raped the girl, shot the boyfriend in the head, then shot the girl in the back and left her for dead. She survived to make the identification, but was paralyzed for life. The jury didn't take long. In four hours they came back with a unanimous verdict: guilty. Another two hours, and they voted for death, with no mitigation. The murderer was eighteen at his trial. It wasn't clear how much he understood about the goings on in the courtroom. His attorney and some civil liberties organization were quoted in the morning newspapers as saying that one of the principal issues on appeal would be whether the law permitted the execution of someone who was a juvenile at the time of the crime. His lawyer was quoted as saying after the verdict, "He's just a kid."

"A kid?" Tommy blurted it out loud in the kitchen. "You can't call someone who does that a kid."

"Tommy?" Arlette's voice was distant, feminine. Tommy was waiting for the water to boil again so he could bring her tea and toast. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing. Nothing." Those lawyers! They ought to go on trial instead of the killers. Tommy burned his tongue on his coffee and then banged his mug down on the kitchen table, splashing hot liquid on his hand as well.

There had been some spotting in the sixth month, and Arlette had been ordered to stay in bed. Tommy walked into the bedroom, waving his arms and carrying the newspaper. Arlette looked so pasty Tommy forgot what he was saying. He opened the window and plumped up a pillow behind her back. She gave him a watery smile. Her belly was stretched now, although the rest of her body was still thin. She was only comfortable lying half on her side with a pillow under one knee. The doctor was concerned about blood clots, too. Arlette, who had never been sick a day in her life, turned out to be fragile in pregnancy. Sometimes she cried and said she always wanted ten children, but she didn't think she could stand to go through this even one more time. Who would have expected this? She had always been healthy as a horse.

By any objective standard Arlette now looks terrible, but every blemish and distention is heartbreakingly dear to Tommy. He lies next to her, and the warmth radiates from her belly into his groin and up to his chest. Now when he laces his fingers over her belly Tommy feels the poke of a tiny elbow or the bump of a heel. When they lie next to one another they watched the ripples circumnavigate her navel. Only a few more weeks now. Gloria has the days until the due date marked off in red on the kitchen calendar, and Tommy secretly goes and counts them. When Tommy feels so angry he thinks his head is about to blow off, he thinks of the feathery signals from his baby, turning beneath his fingers in its watery sleep.

All month the prison had been in an uproar. Johnson had suffered a religious conversion. He was baptized during a contact visit with his spiritual advisor, a man who wore a long gold embroidered robe. Before the guards realized what was going on the minister, he called himself God's One and Only True Minion, had taken a paper cup full of water from the children's drinking fountain in the visiting room and poured it over Johnson's head. Now Johnson decided he didn't want to appeal his death sentence. He confessed to the murder. He said he was ready to die and go directly to heaven, as God's only minister told him he would. The gates of heaven would be wide open and waiting for him. He wanted to talk to God himself about all his crimes as soon as possible and get everything settled once and for all. His lawyers' desperate pleas for his silence were blissfully ignored, nor were the lawyers successful in blocking the publication of these statements. God's One and Only True Minion was his only counsel now, and his defense attorneys could do little more than wring their hands as they attempted to get a court order to cut off his communications with the outside. How did the reporters get through to him with so little trouble? the lawyers wondered, when communications with the death house were supposedly strictly scrutinized.

None of these technicalities bothered Johnson who publicly entrusted his immortality to God's One and Only True Minion. He needed no other intermediaries in this world or the next, not the court which he preferred not to have protect him, not the lawyers who said they were acting on his behalf, not any other ordinary counselor. He fired his public defenders who promptly took the matter to court, where a special hearing was held. The court appointed other lawyers to represent him against his wishes. Johnson said he didn't mind being the first, in fact he preferred it. God couldn't miss him coming in, if he were first. Let the little children learn not to fear death from his example.

Two weeks later he went on a hunger strike. The superintendent called in Tommy and the nisei doctor and told them they might have to attach and monitor the IVs if the court upheld the decision to force feed the prisoner. In the meantime TV crews and newspaper reporters waited outside the prison gates every day and asked everyone who came in and out about Johnson's condition, as if Johnson was the most important person in the place. The reporters regularly intercepted the chief warden on his way to work in the morning, and he used the opportunity to mention deficiencies in correctional budgets. God's One and Only True Minion was a tall white man who wore a fez and a majestic beard. Sometimes when he waited in the corridor during the count, prisoners could be heard to catcall, "Hey, white boy." The way he swooped in and out twice a day, every time causing consternation among the guards assigned to pat and frisk all visitors, might well convince any one he had the ear of the Lord. Those voluminous flowing robes could have concealed anything, as well as a large man. The prison always assigned special guards to take him aside to be frisked, and everyone always came out of the little cubicle smiling.

The prison officials racked their brains for an excuse to keep him out, but the spiritual advisor did lay claim to a congregation of sorts, a ragtag band who lived in tents in a field without electricity or running water while they waited for the Second Coming. The regulations were vague about the definition of clergy, but they clearly envisioned visits by ministers. The attorney general advised the superintendent there might be a legal problem if the spiritual advisor were categorically barred when other, more conventional church people were admitted. None of this made sense to Tommy. The lawyers made everything worse and then fought with one another. Every fight, every snag required a court appearance and new papers to be filed.

After every visit from God's One and Only True Minion, Johnson repeated his vow to starve himself into heaven as rapidly as possible, if the authorities refused to carry out his wish for the more humane method of execution. God's One and Only True Minion spoke in riddles from his painted van which was given a special space in the prison parking lot. His words seemed to add up to saying that Johnson was now in a position of moral superiority to the victims, who had simply had the misfortune to be murdered. The thin, bearded face of the spiritual advisor began to appear regularly in the newspaper alongside the stories about the hunger strike. His following grew. All the spaces for tents in the open field were filled. The surrounding householders worried about sanitary conditions. Several community meetings were held, but nothing was done. The tent community was technically in compliance with the arguably inadequate health regulations. Johnson refused to meet with the lawyers assigned by the court, but motions and arguments on his behalf were carried on anyway. The usual array of organizations lined up in predictable postures on both sides.

Then when the public was getting tired of the spiritual advisor's beatific gaze and the details of the menus Johnson refused, Darby had a gall bladder attack. He sued to have his own doctor brought in after claiming that the prison doctor was a sadist who examined him with out-of-date equipment, before incorrectly diagnosing his condition as indigestion. A pro bono lawyer from out of state filed a million-dollar damage claim against the doctor, the superintendent, the commissioner of the prisons, and the governor, all in their personal capacity.

Darby was almost as gifted at public relations as God's One and Only True Minion. He had a knack for getting reporters to print his complaints about his health and prison conditions. Who would have thought anyone cared about either? He made fun of the institutional rules, the guards, and the superintendent. He even made jokes at his own expense. Two publishers offered him a book contract for his autobiography. He filed the lawsuit against his first defense attorney who had signed a book contract himself for Darby's life story and an account of the trial. Darby claimed he was too upset to know what he was signing when the lawyer produced a consent form with his signature. Darby gave out the unlisted phone number on the wing, and Darby's opinions on copyright and the ethics of publishers as well as lawyers were featured in the Sunday newspaper. It took the prison officials two weeks to get the number changed again, and for another week the calls for Darby from reporters were rerouted to a nursing home where they were sporadically answered by a sentient person. Everyone seemed to have forgotten that two months earlier Darby had been convicted of murdering two defenseless young women, and it was likely he would be convicted of more.

At least the guys at the CSU knew who they were. They were the guys who the state was going to kill. Their deaths belonged to the public. They were celebrities. They could say anything, and anything could be said about them. They were going to die so they could be treated as if they were dead already. Everyone liked to read about them. They passed the time in different ways. Davenport, the accountant who had killed his wife and children, was obsessed with numerology. At the slightest hint of interest from anyone he would bring out complicated charts and magic number squares, showing how a set of prime numbers always summed to the same number, a magic number, across, diagonally, up or down. Didn't that prove the existence of a rational order?

Sometimes Tommy was assigned to check in the visitors. The regulations required that all headgear be removed before entering the visitors' lounge. A single embrace was allowed at the beginning and end of the visit. Otherwise no bodily contact, except hand holding, was permitted. Anyone who might be a girlfriend had to be turned into a wife. Guards asked for marriage licenses. Men who had dismembered women and beaten them insensible now sat on plastic chairs and held hands with their women, like teenagers.

The regulations governed when to eat, when to go to work, when to have a phone call, when to have a shower. And death row had more rules, more special treatment. Men who never restrained themselves, who shot and killed on an impulse, had every aspect of their life monitored by a camera and according to rules on blue paper. The language of the regulations was the language of no man or woman. It was language with all traces of emotion bleached out. Sentences used the passive voice, and whenever a particularly gruesome or distasteful act was described, such as killing a prisoner, or the removal of a dead body, a stream of multisyllabic words poured onto the page. The act of killing became the implementation of the warrant appointing the execution date. The pushing of the button for killing became the carrying out of the instructions pursuant to the administrative plan manual, subdivision (a) of the subsection concerned with carrying out the dated execution warrant. Tommy's mind fogged over when he read the regulations. His mind was on a carousel passing the same streamered sentences time and time again, watching the painted phrases going up and down. Were they doing it, or weren't they? Who did it? And would he do it?

"That fellow Darby," George said. "He has the gift of gab." Then George started to laugh. "Come on, Mama," he said to Gloria. "I'm not dead yet." George got up from the table, held his arms above his head and snapped his fingers, while swaying and moving his feet slowly in a circle. It was not like any dancing Tommy had seen before. His clothes hung on him, and he was carelessly shaven. His movements were disjointed, as if his extremities had been thrown at his trunk and stuck there.

Gloria shook her head, but she smiled. Then Tommy got up and imitated his father's dancing. Gloria laughed at him and said, "Look how fat you've gotten!" And Tommy stuck out what was now a beer belly. "I'm pregnant," he said and threw his mother a kiss.

"At least Mom laughed," Tommy said to Arlette when he got home.

Since Arlette couldn't leave the house without permission from the doctor, Tommy now went out for food, bringing back leaky, silver-lined packages which left a spicy smell in the car's interior for days.

Arlette finished off her chicken wing and chewed the end of the bone. Tommy was rubbing her ankles. The TV was running behind Tommy's back. Arlette pointed to a figure on the screen with a greasy finger. "That woman won five million dollars in a lottery." Tommy handed her a Kleenex, and Arlette wiped her hands. The woman who won the lottery and her husband were holding hands. No, they wouldn't do anything special with the money. Sell their trailer and move into a mansion? Why? That was their home. Get new teeth, the woman said giggling, pulling her husband's arm up with her hand and covering her mouth.

The news switched to a clump of African children, their spiked arms and legs stripped of flesh and dusty black, like the sharp remnants of trees after a forest fire. When the camera zoomed closer their eyes seemed all whites except for a well of hunger at their center, which seemed to take in the whole house, white starched curtains, greasy food containers, and the sleepy overfed couple on the couch. Tommy put his head down, and Arlette changed the channel. Tommy heard a familiar voice. The superintendent was answering a reporter's questions about Johnson's hunger strike. How long could he hold out? an offstage voice asked. The superintendent looked straight at Tommy from the screen and answered gravely.

"There's your boss!" Arlette said. "He looks funny."

The superintendent said that starvation was a painful way to die, but since Johnson had a constitutional right to refuse medical

treatment the prison would not give him pain killers against his will. But yes, they were considering forced feeding through a tube. No, that was not medical treatment. A final decision had not yet been made, and probably a court order would be required.

"Oh, God," Tommy said. He reached over Arlette's stomach for the monitor. That probably means me, he said to himself. I hope they don't call me in.

Arlette put down her plate with its small, shiny bones picked clean and curled onto her side. She pulled Tommy's head to her and stroked his hair. They been practicing breathing, and Tommy easily synchronized his own breath to the rise and fall of her breasts. Inhaling the sweet combination of barbecue sauce, chicken fat, baby powder, and cologne, Tommy dozed off as Arlette turned off the sound.

When there was a security crisis or a holiday, Tommy was called to substitute for the regular guards who had put in long overtime hours. He filled in at the prison mail room. For four hours a day he slit open letters to inmates, looking for cash, drugs, or razor blades.

Tommy wasn't supposed to read the letters to prisoners, but he did. Many were unintelligible, with childishly drawn capital letters and misspelled words. Mostly, they were just messages, messages with a pained urgency. A mother wrote about her surgery. Four weeks in the hospital but now, thank God, she could get down to the cellar. Hot denials from girlfriends which picked right up from the slam down hang up of last week's phone call. Solicitations offering legal assistance. Pleas from those who couldn't make it to visit. The baby was sick, and its mother didn't know a doctor. She didn't make it to the welfare office to pick up the check. I had to go to work, and I was too tired to do anything else. The pennies were squealing from being pinched so hard. It was enough to make a man yearn to be out on the street where he could at least steal a car.

Some prisoners conducted several passionate epistolary romances simultaneously from behind bars. Others met a woman, convinced her she was in love, and got married, and all while they were locked up within the prison walls. A wedding sometimes warranted a single conjugal visit, but sometimes it didn't.

In the visitors' lounge desultory teenagers chewed gum and twirled the red, plug-in phones by their coiled cords. Were these kids in tight jeans and high heels wives? Baby sisters? Girlfriends? If they weren't prancing around the plastic floor or pawing the ground, they were lying down fiat out on the red benches, blowing smoke at the ceiling. Then in a small stall, a cylindrical phone booth, they would plug in their red telephone and shout to their friend, father, brother, or husband, gesticulating to the upper half of him visible through the barrier.

Tommy began to slip away from the office more often. Johnson had begun taking water and some food. Things were temporarily calm. If the rabbit man was not there, no one else cared what he did. When he was there the rabbit man didn't notice or comment upon his absences. Tommy would arrive first thing in the morning, make a couple of phone calls to register his presence, then disappear for four or five hours. He either sat in court, or went to the basement where he played checkers on a rippling black and red portable board with a guard who had worked there so long he could tell a supervisor's footstep half a corridor away, in plenty of time to roll up and stash the board, slip the checkers into his pants pockets, and light a cigarette. This guard had been at the prison for so long he knew how to get everything done. The other guards and even the inmates asked him for advice. "We're nothing but a cap and pair of pants to them," this guard was fond of saying. It wasn't clear whether "them" was the prisoners or the bosses, but Tommy found himself agreeing to both versions.

The guards hated courts, judges and lawyers. They talked about the appeals going on and on forever. They said, by the time the feds get around to the new death sentences we'll all be retired. And it was true, wasn't it? The courts seemed to have endless amounts of time for these death cases, but a civil case couldn't get a hearing. The appeals dragged on for years, with the costs multiplying exponentially, as the legal system chased its own tail. Still, Tommy was relieved it was all taking so long. Then it wasn't Tommy's problem, was it? He didn't make the decision. It was his job to run law books from Darby's cell back and forth to the library. It was Tommy's job to write in the daily log book for the CSU every time he brought a book of cases for Darby or delivered a holy message for Benjamin. His entries included the time and place: "delivered law books (three)" or "No. 6 shouting, 10 P.M. to 10:45 P.M. January 31. Others yelled at him to shut up."

The rest of the prison activities revolved around the count. Three times a day all prisoners had to be counted and located. The count took over an hour, and no one, guard or prisoner, could move from one wing to another while the numbers were being called out over the loudspeaker. If there was a discrepancy in the totals for a wing or section, all the names for that wing were read out over the loudspeaker and the prisoners answered individually by their names and numbers.

The prison was old, except for the death house which had been refurbished and included the latest technical innovations in security. In the rest of the prison, the walls, the windows, and the offices were dirty and surpassingly ugly. No one was to be gratified by being here. There was not a colorful picture nor a graceful curve anywhere. The doors were opened by an old computer buried in a central control room.

The guards, most of whom had barely graduated from high school, were like the astronauts trapped in a space craft, at the mercy of the people far away. They were powerless to change the trajectory of their ship or open the doors. The control panel was crude, wooden with big red and green lights. It looked as if it had been hammered together on weekends in the prison shop, and it probably had been. Buzzers went off as the men stared out through a thick plastic bulletproof barrier. God help the guard who was taken hostage, since everyone else would be huddled in here. If the prison went up in a riot, the control room operators would be encased in a bubble, pushing buttons and sounding alarms, hoping the electricity would not be cut.

The death house was the most modern, even luxurious, part of the place. It had been rebuilt as soon as the penalty was reinstated, with shiny chrome plumbing and thick plastic and metal doors and computerized locks. The count was simple here, everyone was always in his cell. For the death house inmates there was no sitting in booths and shouting into telephone receivers. Members of their families, their teams of defense lawyers, and the clergy visited in a new, clean and separate room.

Darby had no visitors except his many lawyers. His stepmother never came from California for the trial and had been quoted as saying that she hoped the state would execute him because there never had been anything good about him. He refused to see the Catholic priest, whom he called a "turned-collar publicity seeker." Darby had been granted special permission to bring in a computer, and a death penalty fanatic donated the money for online library access. At night he wrote long memos to his ever changing cadre of lawyers. Occasionally he wrote letters and drafted petitions for the others.

As for Johnson, his mother and sister visited regularly. Now that the hunger strike had stopped they came with a celebratory air. Darby wrote a legal sounding petition for Benjamin to have his own minister present at his execution. After all, the rules provided for it, didn't they? Didn't they come right out and say in the regulations that if a condemned person made a request in writing a clergyman of his choice could be present at the event. The clergyman would be allowed to sit with the witnesses, six adults chosen from the public by the superintendent, and the eight representatives of the news media. Tommy read it himself in the regulations.

Tommy spent three days a week in the death wing. One of his jobs was to answer their questions about the regulations. Of course he wasn't a lawyer, and some of the prisoners knew more about the law than he did. But he tried. The regulations seemed clear enough on their face. They all had copies. But questions arose nonetheless. Another part of his job was to keep the log of the death house. He wrote down who came and went, who sent letters, who was working out in his cell with barbells, and who didn't eat their dinner. Over the course of months some of the inmates had become friendly, and he held brief shouted conversations with them which were listened to by everyone else.

Every Thursday Tommy had to monitor the death row prisoners taking their mandated showers. He stood in his clothes at the edge of the curtainless communal shower and watched as Darby, curiously slight but potbellied, vigorously soaped his flopping genitals, lathered the straggly hair under his arms, while occasionally glancing over his shoulder at Tommy. As if to ask, Hey, you never seen a naked man before? Griselli sang hymns as he soaped his stomach and groin. Davenport was silent and straight, letting the water fall like rain over his body.

Benjamin stood under the steady stream with his back to Tommy and asked only to have the water turned on as hot as possible. Tommy was afraid that he would bum himself, but as hot as possible was not scalding hot, although the steam billowed out into the unit. The prison never let the water get above 100 degrees. Benjamin always turned his front away from Tommy. He was as modest as a school girl. He reached around behind him for the towel Tommy held out and immediately wrapped it around his waist.

Tommy complained to the supervisor that he shouldn't have to stand there holding the towel, like some locker room attendant. We can't issue them the towels, the supervisor said simply. They could strangle themselves. But Tommy still didn't like it, standing there holding the towel like a servant. Sometimes he left it on the back of the chair outside the shower and when the inmate was finished he stepped back to get it. It was absolutely contrary to the regulations to ever turn your back on an inmate. But Tommy didn't follow all the rules to the letter. How could you? Only a robot or a fool could completely conform to all the rules. They were made up by people who sat in offices somewhere, not people who had been here.

Because the building took three times longer to refurbish than was expected and cost five times more than estimated, an arbitrary number of cells were set aside late in the construction calendar. There were so many special provisions for prisoners sentenced to death the unit cost many times more than the other cellblocks. Already the CSU was far too small. The men had to be kept apart from one another, after all they had been found unfit to remain in society. But they had to have a place where they could meet in privacy and confidence with their lawyers. Their lawyers were all enormously suspicious of any one overhearing their conversations. As if all the appeals weren't hopeless anyway. Tommy locked the lawyers in with the clients and peered through the long thin observation window every fifteen minutes, as required by the regulations. Usually the inmate would be nodding while the lawyer talked. Sometimes the lawyer would be writing and nodding, and the prisoner would be talking. Sometimes they both sat without speaking. Tommy had a grudging respect for a few of the lawyers, especially the ones who represented the crazy ones. He thought they earned their money.

What about the women? That was something Tommy always wondered about. He knew they didn't let the women prisoners in with the men, except in that one place where only men over fifty-five could go. Where were they going to put the woman who burned her three children to death in a fire she set in her own home, standing outside while she listened to them scream? The mother said she was saving them from suffering in a cruel world. She told a reporter she thought the children were about to be sexually abused by her estranged husband. He had just been granted custody after she had been found to be mentally unstable. There was apparently some factual basis for both conclusions. She herself knew suffering; she had regularly been beaten by the same husband. Now he was going to take away her children. Where were they going to put her, if the jury decided she was sane enough to be sentenced to death? Arlette said she couldn't stand to see the woman's picture or to hear anything about the case.

When Tommy drove at night through the capital - some blocks were as devastated as a war zone - he saw the dudes in black leather coming out of their lairs to claim the city. The gleaming metal and glass office buildings of official authority were deserted shells at six o'clock, their white fluorescent lights blazing for the cleaning crews who went from cubicle to office, pushing askew the gray furniture, slipping open desk drawers, taking the bits of forgotten change, a sweater, or stamps. The faceless cleaning people regularly took the apple or candy bar left on a desk top. Occasionally they made off with a jacket or a pair of shoes. These men and women in iron gray uniforms came with large plastic bins on rubber wheels and left no traces of themselves, no sign they had been there. Until, perhaps after several days, an attorney missed a silver pen, or his spare suit was gone, the one kept in the claptrap temporary closet for an

unexpected call to court. Or, a typist missed her souvenir coin from Caesar's Palace. Where did all the lifted bits and pieces go, and who ate the food? Did all those relics from the daytime inhabitants drift from one household to another, flotsam in the swirl of daily life until they came to rest in a child's hand, or a mother's kitchen.

Tommy hated driving through the city, although this summer evening as he came home from a night shift a soft, warm summer rain blessed the scene indiscriminately. The filthy streets, the now straggly trees starved for fresh air, the crumbling, boarded up buildings near the train station, once the tenements and then the family homes of immigrants who came to work in the pottery factories. Now a different pack of kids dragged the pot-holed streets in their souped up cars - looking for a sale, or a buy, or a pick up, or a trick. But never for work. They never looked for work. No one seemed to just work for a living anymore.

Before his accident Tommy's father had worked every day in his life. No one gave George anything, not even a job. Gloria, too. She went to her uncle's dry cleaning shop every morning, did the books in a cluttered cubicle, surrounded by a clatter and the steam of the huge cleaning machines. All around her women like herself ran up hems, replaced tattered linings, and laughed at the irreverent jokes of the young girls, most of them right out of high school, who stood at the cash register. These gum-chewing sassy girls dumped the dirty clothes in a bag, grumbled as they tracked down the missing shirts, and swore they weren't going to work anymore when they got married, or won the lottery. Well, Gloria and the other women didn't think they were going to work forever either. They took this job, or another one just like it, just temporarily. To pay off the Christmas bills, or to pay the doctor, or because a husband was drunk, or laid up, or in the army, or had run off, or died. Someone had to carry on. Then they just kept working for years and years after that unpaid Christmas. They too had thought that they'd quit working when they got married and had kids. But it didn't work out that way. They stayed on, developed varicose veins from standing behind the counter, just like their mothers and aunts who had worked their whole lives, too. Where were all those women who didn't work. They must be somewhere else, in another place.

Someone was putting gas in those noisy cars. The clothes the unemployed wore were sharper than anything hanging in Tommy's closet. They go to jail and then complain they had to steal cars or TVs to feed themselves. Back on the street on poverty bail in 48 hours, the crooks would be in their satin and leather riding around in new cars. A lie. It's a lie, Tommy said out loud to himself, as he drove past the desecrated cemetery opposite the railroad station.

He avoided eye contact with the guys in the car next to him who were checking out his car at the stop light. One held a huge silver radio on his lap, blasting rock music onto the shining street loud enough to awaken the soldiers from the Battle of Trenton. The driver was hanging out the window and shouting to a fat girl - she couldn't have been more than thirteen - leaning against the cast iron fence of the graveyard. A few wispy fruit trees struggled to survive, and from out of a bed of broken colored glass and used sanitary napkins, the purple leaves of a plum tree displayed their perfect beauty. Tommy ignored the man in the passenger seat who wore a tight blue turban made from a mesh stocking. Around his wrist was a bracelet of scars and his biceps were decorated with wriggling black tattoos of snakes and women.

Glad to be home, Tommy stuffed Mike's big car into the only parking space left on his small street. Gloria and George, who never took vacations, had gone for an extended stay with some cousins at the shore, and Tommy felt more than ever that he and Arlette lived on a desert island. In Chambersburg the houses marched to the edge of the sidewalk with no green frill of lawn. The awnings were bolted up, as if in permanent eye-opening surprise. Some houses had tiny concrete front porches, sheltered from the sun and rain by a plastic overhang crimped into the kind of bumpy waves which had been fashionable as hairstyles thirty years ago. Tommy and Arlette were the only young people on the block.

The awnings cast green shadows on the gray concrete. Crossing that green shadow before his door, Tommy felt the day's questions slip away. He didn't care if some prisoner starved himself or whether Darby sold his life story three times over. He slipped open the door and wrapped the stillness around himself. Arlette was sleeping, and her sleeping cast a spell of dreaming over the house. From the kitchen faint voices, first a man talking rapidly, then a women laughing. Tommy's skin crawled, but it was just the portable TV perched akimbo on the window sill. The kitchen smelled of apples and cinnamon. Arlette lay on top of the unmade bed in her loose dress with her arms over her head. There were dark circles around her closed eyes.

Tommy shut the bedroom door and sat at the plastic kitchen table, where the black face of the oven stared back at him unblinkingly. He took a beer from the refrigerator without getting up and put his head down on the table, his hand soothed by the cool, wet bottle. No more questions tonight.

VII

The health care supervisor called a special meeting of all the death house personnel in early August to explain the status of Benjamin's and Johnson's case. Johnson's death sentence had been reversed, and the judge had imposed a life sentence, finding that the hold-out juror had been coerced. He would be transferred from the death house. Tommy wondered if anyone would pay attention to any hunger strike which took place off of death row.

Everyone had read the newspapers and was wondering if Benjamin would be allowed to consent to execution and reject all appeals. The superintendent had said unequivocally that executions were not issued on demand. And no one would be executed until all court appeals were completed and all due process complied with. The superintendent frowned as he said this. Other officials were heard to comment that it would save the state some money, to get it over with. In addition to Tommy, at the meeting there was the nisei doctor, a custodian assigned to the special post execution clean up, or disposal duties, a registered nurse, a certified IV technician, one of the dietitians from the prison kitchen, the clerk who was responsible for clearing through the authorized visitors and witnesses, and the guard assigned to monitor the special telephone line from the governor's office. There were also two or three others Tommy didn't recognize.

The guard was a portly, serene black man with a limp who walked with the rolling gait of a sailor. He gave the impression of having seen a lot of strange things come and go in his lifetime, and that he had long ago stopped trying to figure them out. He listened and listened and never said a word or asked a question. He was also the only person in the room who went out of his way to be polite. Perhaps this assignment was a way to give him light duty until retirement. The regular guards took punishing abuse from the inmates, both black and white. With the new long sentences some prisoners were looking at fifty years before they would see a parole officer. The atmosphere inside had become poisonous.

The health care supervisor explained that it was possible that the operational staff would be called upon to perform their duties earlier than expected. Everyone had expected the appeals process to take four or five years. The other states where executions were in progress were several years ahead. But apparently the appeals were now speeding up. The legislature and the governor were considering cutting off some avenues of judicial review. The courts were hurrying along the cases. The United States Supreme Court had lost patience, and the other federal courts were falling into line.

Tommy sat next to the registered nurse, a heavy, sullen black woman. Motionless behind the small, student desk in the education wing, she seemed to pay no attention to what the supervisor was saying. She smoked throughout the meeting and flicked the ashes on the floor at Tommy's feet. Tommy found himself becoming annoyed at the casual way she threw down the cigarette butts next to his feet. After the meeting, he stopped her in the corridor under the pretext of asking something about her job. With her big breasts and square blue-black face, the nurse was not the type of woman Tommy would ordinarily have found attractive. But he pressed his body up against her in the empty prison corridor, looking around furtively to make sure no office doors were open and no legs appeared clown the hall.

The nurse looked up at him with large dark eyes, first surprised, then with hatred. She rubbed herself against him painfully and then turned and sauntered away down the corridor, showing him her thick back and broad behind. Tommy didn't even know her name, but he remained in a state of excitement all day. When he came home he shouted at Arlette, even though she had gotten out of bed especially to prepare him a favorite dinner: pork chops, fresh corn, and sliced beefsteak tomatoes interlocked with rings of red Bermuda onion. She had even cooked Tommy a lemon meringue pie. This day had been an active day for her.

Tommy forgot what was like to be unemployed, not to have anywhere to go in the morning. The rhythm of work made the weeks fly. Tommy liked coming to work, and he no longer thought about Alaska. He didn't even miss his old friend Ants any more. Preparations for the rehearsal had begun. The health care supervisor wanted to do a dry run of the procedures. Not that anything was imminent. But just to be prepared. To make sure all the personnel were in place and everyone knew what to do. Mostly, it was waiting. Waiting for someone else to make a decision. Waiting for the last turn down from the last court. Waiting for the phone call from the governor which would not come, waiting for the condemned to be wheeled in, waiting for the signal to give the injection. The whole process was nothing more than one big wait. Tommy was being paid thousands of dollars to wait to do an act which would take a few seconds, at most. Killing took so little time, especially in comparison to saving life. It was a lot easier. The pages of regulations, the special staff with their functions described in high flying, obfuscating language, the supposedly elaborate equipment and the specially designated facilities were a bureaucratic smoke screen. What was to be done was really very simple. It was the pretense that it was something other than simple which was complicated and hard to understand. Why bother? Why not just say what it was?

As if the institution wasn't in enough of a tizzy, the sentencing of Enrico Ruiz, the Hispanic who raped and murdered two teenagers, was causing additional confusion. The Department of Prisons said they couldn't put him on death row because a regulation said that a person under 21 could not be confined with adult inmates. But another regulation required all persons sentenced to death to be confined together in that special section of the prison set aside for them. The others sentenced to death were necessarily adults, weren't they? There were rumors that the legislature was about to declare that they never intended to sentence juveniles to death anyhow. It was an oversight on their part not to spell that out earlier. The department temporarily held Ruiz in an isolated wing of a juvenile detention center while waiting for the judicial authorities to solve this conundrum. Another trouble was brewing over the woman who set her house on fire and killed her children. She was sentenced to death.

New problems had arisen with Benjamin who continued to assert that he wished to die and meet his God. Benjamin now said that although he would willingly go first, he would refuse the sedative which was required prior to administration of the lethal injection. He preferred, he said, to face final judgment with his senses fully alert. It would be a joyous moment. Besides, he said in a letter typed by Darby and smuggled out to the local newspaper, since the lethal injection itself was not painful, what was the reason for the sedative? Benjamin, who had been labeled as mildly retarded at sentencing, suddenly made a lot of sense. Maybe the uncanny spiritual advisor with the fez was really drafting the letters or dictating to Darby.

Darby championed Benjamin's constitutional right to stop all legal action on his behalf. "He ought to be able to sign himself out of here," Darby said in his colorful way. "Save the state the cost of the appeals and make room for someone else." Since the death house was filled almost to capacity, some other part of the building would have to be remodeled at considerable expense unless someone went out feet first. "Besides," Darby quipped, "people ought to be able to free themselves from the lawyers at death's door, if nowhere else." It was hard to argue with that.

Benjamin's face had become beatific. His behavior was also beyond reproach, by any human standard. He was always gentle and gracious, even to the guards who sometimes taunted him and whispered blasphemous words as they walked by his cell. For the first time in his life, he seemed happy. It was as if he had found what he was born for. When the reporters interviewed his mother, she cried and cried. At first the TV people were fascinated by this uninhibited display of grief. Or frustration. Or bewilderment. Or confusion. But they soon became bored with her tears, whatever their source, and with her repeated, trembling assurances that it was all in the hands of the Lord, although she and her son believed in widely disparate gods. Once more the legislators, both those for and against the death penalty, were the object of media attention. After all, it was August and hot and most of the people in the state who ordinarily made the news were on holiday in places where it was cool and there were no telephones.

The politicians had a lot to say about who deserved to die. They were the only ones who knew the answers. The superintendent and the cops seemed humble and humanitarian by comparison. There was a temporary lull in the death penalty news when a judge was indicted for bribery. The circumstances, the judge claimed he simply found five thousand dollars in cash in his top desk drawer after going to the men's room, briefly captured the public's imagination. The judge insisted upon giving long interviews and saying that he had done no wrong. He had no idea where the money, all in hundred dollar bills, had come from. "I know my rights," the judge said loudly looking straight into the camera. "There's a frame up. I'll fight this all the way to the Supreme Court." His defense attorney could do little but point out that the judge certainly ought to know his rights. A small band on the State House steps, there were more reporters than members of the public, clapped with enthusiasm when the judge appeared after his arraignment. He was released without bond.

At last when he and Gloria had returned from vacation, George had gone back to work. Or it seemed he had gone back to work. The bank as an act of charity assigned him an inside job where he was required to do nothing but sit in the basement and watch a flickering row of television monitors. He just had to sit in front of the gray screens all day. But even though the task was simple, or really no task at all, George often seemed confused. He claimed he couldn't watch all twelve screens at once, although they showed only four or five different locations within the bank. He had difficulty recognizing individual faces on the blurry black and white screen. He couldn't tell the authorized employees from intruders. Several times he set off the alarm system unadvisedly, calling in the security people to apprehend a clerk, or a vault custodian, who was walking quickly and appeared to George to be making a getaway. Twice he called security on the same young black trainee who, George claimed, was skulking out of the basement with his jacket on, when the employee was just going home. Gloria told Tommy she was afraid he'd never be himself again.

Gloria now focused all of her attention on the arrival of the baby. She called Tommy at his office to ask if she could pick up something for dinner for them. She often dropped by in the evening with a magazine for Arlette to make the time go quicker, or Gloria would shampoo and curl her hair. Then the two women would sit on Tommy's bed and Arlette would paint Gloria's toes.

Now Tommy could honestly say he was too busy to talk to his mother when she called him at the office. He stomped his feet under the desk and told Gloria that he could hear his boss was coming, and he had to hang up. Once Gloria called when the nurse was in the office and Tommy had locked the door. They were drinking some rum Tommy brought in. "Who's that with you?" Gloria asked, when she heard the woman's low laugh. "Who are you talking to?"

Tommy said that it was probably better if she didn't call him any more at the office. "I'll see you Sunday, Ma," he said. "Did you play my number today?" Certainly Gloria was the only person who ever asked what he did at work.

Tommy rarely saw Anthony who had moved into an apartment with Julia, over the hysterical objections of her father. Ants was planning to go get a job, even it was only at minimum wage, in the town where Julia was going to college. Anthony still worked three days a week at the Polish butcher shop, but neither his father nor his uncle spoke to him. They paid him his wages in cash without a word. The only person who would talk to him at the family butcher shop was Ginny, his seventeen-year-old cousin. She was more in love with him than ever since he let his hair grow and started riding around on the motorcycle.

Ants asked Tommy for tips on how to find a job in a new city. Tommy had to laugh. "Remember me?" he felt like saying, "I was unemployed for six months." But instead, he told Ants, "Just keep showing up at the unemployment office. In a college town, there will be work."

Anthony nodded grimly and asked Tommy if he could come and stay for a few days while Julia went home to get her clothes ready for college. He also asked if he could take Tommy's only dark suit.

Johnson had resumed his hunger strike. A ruling came down to force feed him. Now a lawsuit was started challenging the legality of the forced feeding. He had to recover his strength. Since he wasn't now under a sentence of death, no one had much interest in whether he wanted to live or die. Johnson himself was characteristically philosophical about the new ruling. He believed he would be sentenced to death again, at some other legal proceeding, even though the imposition of the life sentence could not be appealed. He said he wouldn't resist the forced feeding, even though he knew the process was painful, tortuous even. He was quoted as saying that he was sure the state would soon see the error of its ways and stop feeding and keeping him alive against his will.

The spiritual advisor said he was going to pray for the Supreme Court to be enlightened by the Divine Spirit and lift the order. One of Johnson's advisers thought his direct appeal should be reinstated because his repentance and change of heart were matters relevant to sentence. He was a different person now. The jury which sentenced him to death should be reconvened so that it could now consider sparing the life of the man he now was.

Darby got the paper to print what he would like for his last meal. He sensed that the hunger strike was losing interest. He wanted to test the kitchen. Steak, it would be un-American not to order steak, fried onions, mushrooms, Belgian endive salad and rum raisin ice cream. The attorney general would have to issue a special interpretation of the regulations for the Belgian endive and the rum raisin ice cream. The endive had to be brought from a specialty food store in Manhattan, and the rum raisin violated the provision against alcohol.

An outraged mother wrote saying that she didn't see why the taxpayers paid for T-bone steaks and fancy ice cream for condemned murderers when hungry school children were only served canned beans and catsup as a vegetable. She didn't know or care what Belgian endive was, but she guessed it cost a mite more than the one tablespoon, or rather a little plastic package, of ordinary Hunt's tomato catsup which was what her son was given in his lunch at school, courtesy of the state. A religiously oriented citizen replied by asking in the letters to the editor column if the outraged mother had forgotten the quality of mercy. He hoped that she and her children would live long and be able to afford steak, and perhaps she would have the privilege one day of tasting Belgian endive, a pale white

and green vegetable similar to lettuce but with a more delicate flavor. The writer of the letter applauded the choice. Had she forgotten the prisoner would probably never eat again?

Tommy had given up on trying to keep straight all of the legal maneuvering. The death penalty kept the lawyers busier than a hundred bankruptcies. The government paid and paid, and that meant the taxpayers paid for it all. All the shenanigans and hours and hours of court time and enough printed paper to slay a forest and fill up several libraries.

Tommy was waiting now. Perhaps there would be a stay, perhaps there would be further appeals. There might be some as yet unheard of challenge to the process. But sooner or later the operation would go ahead. Whether it was Johnson, or Darby, or Ruiz, or someone who hadn't yet been sentenced. Too many preparations had been made. Too many people were waiting for it to happen. Too many people had thought they had thought it through and made commitments on paper. The equipment and personnel were all in place.

The operational staff had gone through several complete rehearsals, laughing a little about the fact that they wouldn't be laughing if this was the real thing. Picking up the special phone and listening to it buzz, for the first time Tommy saw his two counterparts. They greeted one another matter of factly behind the curtain without exchanging names. One was the older man Tommy had seen in the corridor when, it seemed like years ago, he came for his first interview. The third was a small Spanish fellow Tommy's age whose face was mapped with purple burn scars.

The three of them sat in a row on stools behind the curtain, which turned out to be a plain brown muslin curtain, not a plastic one. When they saw the health care supervisor raise his hand, they simultaneously pressed the three little handles which released clear fluid into three identical lines. This time the liquid in the lines spilled out of a plastic bottle on the flat, empty gurney covered by a blank white sheet.

The doctor, the registered nurse and the certified IV technician watched the fluid flow and checked to see that all three lines were going. Everyone was quiet. Everyone was deliberate. No one caught anyone else's eye. The eight chairs for the radio, television and newspaper people were empty, but in place, as were the chairs for the public witnesses. Even though it was just a rehearsal. Tommy found going through the procedures was a relief. They had spent so much time talking about it, to do it was easier. It wasn't hard at all. Everything was clear; even though nothing made any sense. At each stage someone told Tommy what he was supposed to do. He hoped his tube would be the one to carry the lethal injection, whether it was Darby, or Benjamin, or someone who he hadn't met yet. It was just like giving an anesthetic, wasn't it? He had no questions left.

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