

Young and Pretty
in Bay City

Richard Fliegel

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1. Johnny Doe

ON WEEKDAY NIGHTS IN THE SUMMERTIME, the wooden boards of the Santa Monica Pier groan under the footfalls of sandals and flip-flops and running shoes, leather heels and rope soles and plain bare feet. Jazz concerts in the salty air bring an extra load of visitors, and the restaurants and arcades, the concession stands and souvenir shops do a brisk trade in twice-fried snapper and undercooked steamers, overpriced T-shirts and knickknacks you would never look at anyplace else. The windows on the boardwalk sell *churros* and soft pretzels, cotton candy and potato chips, fresh made and still dripping with oil. People hang around after the concert to have a little fun. The Playland Arcade stays open until two o'clock in the morning, with girls shrieking on the rides that rattle over Pacific Park for two or three tickets apiece.

It's a carnival sideshow. You can throw rubber rings at empty cokes or softballs at milk bottles that never held any milk. Flocks of four-foot Tweetie birds flutter over your head, chased by stuffed Sylvesters. Teenagers line up for rickety rides that scare them silly or make them sick. The carousel turns one way and the Ferris wheel another. The West Coaster plunges through buzzing neon tubes with a scream that travels back from car to car like a hiccup through a caterpillar. Bumper cars bump, steel wheels roll over greasy rails, and a grinning Sea Serpent sails through the air. At the end of the pier sits the harbor master's tower. Behind it, a cantina serves taquitos loaded with salsa in order to sell margaritas. When waiters carry armloads of plates backward onto the patio, mariachi trumpets and guitars leak out the doors and float out to sea. In all that noise, you can hardly hear yourself think on the pier -- or underneath it either.

The city built a pier in 1909 to toss its garbage off. Seven years later a Coney Island showman named Charlie Looff built a second one, a private Pleasure Pier with a carousel. Somehow, the two piers merged into one. In the twenties, people flocked like gulls for the Whirlwind Dipper coaster and La Monica Ballroom, where five thousand flappers could dance at once. The pier was burned, and washed out, and they built it back again. In the seventies, the City Council decided to tear it down, but the people of Santa Monica didn't like that idea and the next time you looked at City Hall, a different City Council was in charge.

Something about the pier gets your juices flowing. Couples stroll down the creaking boards. Two quarters in a children's ride will jiggle a girl on a pint-sized Harley-Davidson, while her boyfriend watches her bounce. There are girls in twos and threes, and boys in threes and fours, who ogle each other between the rows of video games, skeeball lanes, air hockey and foosball machines. But there are others who can't find enough excitement on top of the pier and make their way down to the shadows below, to hunt for something vulnerable in the sand.

The supports under the pier are made of steel now, huge pilings so big you can hardly get your arms around them. They march out on both sides like good soldiers, straight into the ocean. In the middle they stand together, arms locked at funny angles, holding up a maze of girders and pipes and catwalks. If you look up at the pier, you see salt stains from the last ten decades caked along the bottom of ancient boards on the unpaved part of the stroll. For all that time, people have walked on the pier and the gulls have wheeled over it -- and other people have slept beneath it, closing their eyes as the surf rolled in and then rolled out and then rolled in again.

On a certain summer night, the Mole was definitely vulnerable. He couldn't have been in Los Angeles more than a month or two. It had taken him that long to figure out that the best place for a homeless teen with grimy gray skin was not in the downtown district but westward, at the beaches, where the crowds still milling after nightfall provide some protection from the law. It had not been easy for him to make his way to the beach, where the money he had *spanged* bought him only a paper cone of greasy fried snapper and a Styrofoam cup of coffee. A room was out of the question. That was okay with him. He had his blanket and he had the sand, and the noise spilling over the pier might slow down anybody thinking about molesting him overnight. The Mole came down the steps looking for an inconspicuous spot to curl up, without bothering anybody. He propped his Boy Scout backpack where he could watch the waves and wrapped himself in his army blanket. But a chill wind swept across the open beach and seeped right through the wool. He took refuge among the poles that held up the end of the pier. Here the sound of the waves was louder because of the echoing wood, but the spray was a little further off, and the columns blocked some of the bone-chilling wind. It was pitch dark under the pier, but the Mole was not afraid of the dark.

On the far side of the forest of poles lay another figure, tangled in a bathrobe, smelling of wine. He was tall, black, and underweight; sixteen years old, going on sixty. He lay flat on his back with his mouth open and his red flannel shirt unbuttoned, sand mixed with vomit on his sleeveless undershirt. The Mole thought the drunk would sleep through the night, but he was wrong about that. The drunk was me, and I was awake, watching him through my lashes. Yet I was the least of his worries, because higher up underneath the pier something was moving that could have been a cat.

The Mole stared into the darkness until he thought he made out a blink of yellow eyes. They gave him a chill, but he shook it off and decided that the natural advantages of his sleeping spot outweighed the risk of robbery. He had nothing in his backpack but a ratty towel and a few pairs of scrunched-up briefs. What could anybody take from him that would be worth the trouble? He didn't consider his dignity, or even his life, because what good does it do you thinking about those?

There are people who feel good when nobody bothers them, and people who can only feel good when they're bothering somebody else. The *clica* who found the Mole beneath the pier were the second type of people. Somebody must have made them feel like pieces of trash, because the only way they could make it up was to do the same to the Mole. Three *vatos* tramped down the wooden stairs as if they wanted to splinter them. On the left was Miguelito, two hundred pounds of blubber in a Pendleton shirt buttoned only at his collar and black shorts sagging past his knees. On the right was Cuete Clavo, a *flaquillo* who jiggled with each step and leaned against the handrail to bury his face in a brown paper bag. He wore no shirt but had blue suspenders holding up his jeans, rolled at the cuffs, and a blue bandanna for a head rag. Two Clavos had grown up in his *barrio*. He was *Cuete*, the "firecracker," *Caló* slang for a gun.

In the center was Enríque, who they called *Ree-kay*, their *mero chingón*, with a glitter of malevolence in his soft, brown eyes. Shorter than his two *compañeros* but built like a bull, he bunched his muscular shoulders and neck by crunching his jaw. He was staying with an aunt on Michigan Avenue, near the cemetery, where his mother had sent him to get him away from *la vida loca* -- gang life -- in the Ramona Gardens housing project in East Los Angeles. He trotted down to the waterline and stared into the ocean. A

rage black as the Pacific filled his heart, lamenting his exile from his *barrio*. He tossed in his beer can, stiff-armed, like a hand grenade. Miguelito followed him, found some junk that had washed up on the beach, and threw that in, too. Cuete Clavo still sat on the bottom step with his face in the paper bag. Enríque looked around and saw two bodies lying in the shadows of the pier. The Mole was closer and smaller and didn't smell as bad as the wino. So they went after him ahead of me.

The first one to reach him was Ríque, who wore a white T-shirt, starched khakis, and black shoes with a baked-on shine. The khakis were the kind they call "counties," prison-issue. They had the sharpest crease and sagged the lowest -- which is a funny fashion choice, when you think of the guards who created it. When they give out prison pants, they don't let you try them on. Too tight is worse than too loose, so they always estimate up. Then they take away your belt. Ríque must have enjoyed it there, because he still liked to dress like a *pinto* -- and act like one, too. He had two teardrops tattooed on his cheek, indicating two years in juvey hall, or two homeys dead, or two times he had cried in the movies. He looked down at the boy in the sand as if the Mole were a weird fish that had washed up with the seaweed.

"*Orale*, Miguelito. Check out *el vatito*."

The Mole sat up as Cuete Clavo and Miguelito trudged over and encircled him. He knew he was in trouble. He started rolling up his blanket, as if he had taken their spot accidentally and would get himself away without a fuss. But none of them cared about the spot. Ríque said something I couldn't catch, and the Mole tried to answer. But before he could get it out, someone kicked him in the ribs. I figured I was next and didn't move, pretending I was so fast asleep, they couldn't get a rise out of me. I had to keep my eyes

from squeezing shut and giving me away. I heard them kicking, and I heard him moan -- softly, the way people do who are in pain, when it first occurs to them they might die. Then he did something surprising: he called out, "Somebody help me." Not loud, just conversational. "Someone help me. Please."

You almost never hear anybody call for help on the streets, except the crazies when they call on invisible powers to help them defeat even more mysterious enemies. The reason is, nobody answers. It's dangerous to answer. Not only could the person threatening them threaten you, but the victim himself could just as easily turn on you, accusing you of whatever he thinks is being done to him. *The Good Samaritan becomes a Dead Samaritan* -- that's what they say on the streets. *Keep your nose in your own business and it won't get bitten off.* Half a dozen expressions give the same basic advice. There's only one that contradicts it -- the one that starts, *Do unto others.* But that was changed on the streets to end, *before they do unto you.*

The thing about the Mole's calling for help was this: it didn't sound like he was trying to scare them off, or trying to attract anybody's attention. He didn't sound like he thought anybody would hear him, either. He just knew he was going to die if he didn't get help and he had nothing left to lose. He sounded like an animal, if you want to know the truth, making a pitiable squeak, like someone was gutting a kitten.

"Help me."

"You talking to me, *lambiche*?"

"Help me."

"*Pégale*, Ríque. Shut him up."

I thought the same thing: was he talking to *me*?

"Somebody, help --"

It made me angry, having to hear it, and it must have made them feel the same way. They kicked him harder and shouted at him, calling him names like faggot, pussy, *puto*. But he wouldn't stop. Then something happened that made them shout differently. I don't speak any Spanish, so I couldn't understand it, but you can tell what anybody's feeling when they're hollering. They were still pissed, but they weren't enjoying kicking him any more. I thought he might have gotten to them with his mewling. But I heard something else as their voices grew louder -- less disgust and disdain, more complaining. They sounded like they were afraid. That's when I decided to take a chance and peek through my eyelids.

I couldn't hardly believe what I saw.

Somebody else was standing right next to Enríque who hadn't been there before. He appeared like a hairy Peter Pan out of the forest of steel supports higher up the beach. He had a green bottle in his hand, broken off below the label, driven into a roll of fat at Enríque's neck. His other hand was on the opposite side of Enríque's head, holding the *cholo's* temple. A trickle of blood seeped around the broken bottle stuck in his flesh and stained the neck of his T-shirt. It was an empty bottle of Boone's Farm that could have been *my* bottle, since I had tossed an empty there, earlier in the evening. Now everyone was standing around with their mouths hanging open wider than usual.

"*Chingao?*" said Miguelio. "What the hell?"

The kid with the bottle wore a black motorcycle jacket, cut-off denim jeans, and nothing else except sandals. His jaw clenched and unclenched, as if he were chewing on something, like who to go after next. He had yellow eyes with black irises that jumped

from one of them to the next, looking for a reason. Enríque was staring out of the corners of both eyes, afraid to move a muscle or do anything that might disturb the broken bottle. He knew he would bleed to death if it was yanked out, or if the pressure eased up on the bottleneck. For the moment, the Bottle Boy was calling the shots, but that moment could end. Miguelito fought an impulse to beat him to a bloody pulp, damn the consequences. The Bottle Boy knew it. He let go of Ríque's head, but held onto the bottle and tapped its mouth with his finger. Each time he tapped it, Ríque winced in pain.

“Aya -- ”

Cuete Clavo pulled something small and silvery out of his pocket. It looked like a twenty-two. "*Lo chingaré,*" he said, eyeing a spot above the sternum, exposed between the teeth of the open jacket zipper.

"*Chale!*" screamed Ríque. "Are you *loco*? Get the car!"

Cuete Clavo hesitated, uncertain what to do.

The Bottle Boy nodded. "You've got maybe half an hour to get him to St. John's before he bleeds to death." He peered at the wound more closely. "Maybe less. If you start running now, there's, like, one chance in a hundred you can save this *pachuco*'s life. Why don't we call it a night?"

Ríque glared in hatred. Cuete Clavo looked confused, but Miguelito was pissed. What had started out as a fun time had suddenly turned to the runs.

"*Qué jodido,*" he muttered. *What a mess.*

"You hold onto this," said the Bottle Boy and let go of the bottleneck.

Ríque grabbed it before it fell away. He shoved Cuete Clavo again and screamed, "*La carrucha, ése.* Go get the car!"

Cuete Clavo obeyed. Miguelito hesitated, then ran after his *compa*.

Ríque raised a wicked finger. "I'll see you, *gabacho*."

The Bottle Boy picked up a twisted limb of driftwood that was lying at his feet.

"You wanna piece of me? *Aqui estoy*."

"Later for you, *puto*." Enríque pressed the bottle into his own neck with one hand and took off, screaming at his *compañeros* first to wait up for him, then to keep going, finally to shut up and run. It was hard for him to run on the sand so he tripped and had to pick himself up with one hand. He almost fell flat on his ass. Watching him go was so funny, I forgot myself and laughed out loud.

That was a mistake.

The Bottle Boy heard me laughing, when I was supposed to be fast asleep. His eyes swung over to the shadows under the pier, and the laughter gagged in my throat -- which made it harder to pretend I hadn't seen a thing. I stretched my arms behind me like tent poles, propped myself up, and tried to make my head stop rolling on my neck.

"You all right?" he asked me.

Tricky question. The stars were bleary as flying saucers, and the nape of my neck ached between my ears. Was that *all right*? "I think so."

"What's your name?"

He probably didn't realize how complicated an answer that one required, either. But I wasn't up to it yet. "Walker. Mosley. Most folks call me Moses."

"Johnny Doe. They didn't hurt you, did they?"

"They didn't get a chance."

"Can you walk?"

My knees wobbled but held me up. “Sure.”

“Then help me carry *him*,” Johnny said, meaning the Mole.

“Carry him where?”

He waved. “To the bluffs.”

I looked across the beach to the bridge over the Pacific Coast Highway and the brick steps crawling up the cliff-side. “What's on the bluffs?”

"You want to leave him here?"

"I was thinking if we called a cop, they'd take him to an emergency room."

"And then where?"

"Wherever he's run away from."

He waited for me to remember why nobody deserved that. When you run away, you do it for a reason, and that reason was probably still there, waiting for him to come home again. Every kid on the street knows that. The surprise was that Johnny cared about what happened to the Mole, before he even met him face to face. “Take his feet,” he told me, “and try not to drop him. Or I’ll drop you, first chance I get.”

Those weren’t the kindest words I'd ever heard, but he wasn’t trying to be kind. He was trying to save a boy’s life. We had the Mole between us, beaten up pretty badly, with maybe even a few broken bones. His face looked like the Sierra Nevada; his left eye, Mono Lake. He could have had a punctured lung or a bleeding kidney leaking away, while we talked it over. Johnny picked up one skinny foot by the cuff around its ankle and dropped the Mole's heel securely into my hand. I bent over and picked up the other heel myself.

As we carried the Mole from under the pier, I got my first look at Johnny Doe. His black hair stood up on the left, where it had been plastered with sweat from lying on his

side. He was thinner than I thought, but almost six feet tall. He wore a black jacket, cut-offs, and a flimsy pair of sandals. The right one hung by a thread between the leather thong and the sole. His jacket hung unzipped over a flat stomach that showed peach fuzz and traces of muscular definition. He looked like a bit of rough trade that might catch a ride from a middle-class John, whose kids would be orphans by morning. I didn't know then how generous he could be on an impulse, or how cruel, either. All I knew was what I saw -- he had a temper and was comfortable with acts of personal violence. Which is all you need to know, sometimes.

2. Moses

The night has a terrible beauty most people never see. That's what Johnny told the Mole the last time any of us saw him, and I've been puzzling it over since, trying to figure out what he might've been thinking about and whether there's anything to it. The day has its advantages, like warmth and relative safety, the company of your fellow man, not to mention girls in bikinis. But the night has its strong points, too. If you've ever spent a few hours on a roadside near dawn, when the wind has its fingers in the reeds and rattles them like sunflowers, while you're curled up in a dry ditch out of sight of the highway patrol --

Then you know what he meant by *a terrible beauty*. Otherwise, you don't. You might believe that you've witnessed a night in a campground maybe, with a ranger in his wooden booth when you drive in the gate -- but there was nothing terrible in that night, was there? *Terrible* has the word *terror* in it. It's got to be able to make you feel afraid, and a night in a tent beside a babbling brook is not the same thing as a night out-of-doors on a city street. I should know, having spent a thousand nights fending for myself. If you think sleeping in a shelter isn't fending for yourself, you ought to try spending a night in one. A babbling brook never wakes you up, muttering in your ear.

Still, as Johnny said, the night has a terrible beauty. I don't think he meant *at night*, when you put a bolt and a chain on your door and check your window locks. We see you in there, behind the blinds or the drapes, or the blinds *and* the drapes, with the security system blinking on a panel in your bedroom, that you hope means somebody is keeping an eye on you. Somebody in a uniform. Instead of one of *us* -- who might be sitting outside your front gate, blowing into our cupped hands, as we watch the lights in your bedroom go

out, and then the light behind the bathroom window treatment. We see the bulb burning every night, downstairs in your kitchen. Either someone in the house has one hell of an appetite, or you might be trying to fool us.

You don't have to worry about me, in that way. There *are* people on the streets who you *should* be worrying about, whether you know it or not. There are people out there who would just as soon hit you with a rusty pipe, who hardly need the incentive of what you've got in your underwear drawer or your pocketbook. But I am not one of them. My name is Walker Morrison Mosley, because my mother liked to read so much. Most people call me Moses. I used to be your neighbor. You woke me up when you wanted to shoot some hoops in Lincoln Park. You gave me a quarter on the Third Street Promenade. You have looked me in the eye and looked away again. You might have prepared a meal for me with your church group or your synagogue and served it to me in Palisades Park. If you have, thank you. I'll bet I enjoyed it.

I lived on the streets of Los Angeles and the cities hereabouts from thirteen to sixteen years old. In Santa Monica, that may be longer than a quarter of the population. Everybody comes here for the same reasons: for the sun blinking off the ocean as you look over your shoulder on the Pacific Coast Highway, admiring the curve of the bay. For Hollywood or Disneyland -- but why were those places built out here? For the sake of the weather, too. What makes a picture postcard for you is a practical matter for us. Once you tilt up your blinds and raise the heat, turn down your quilt and drop a curtain on your day, you could be living any place. But outside, thirty degrees of climate can mean the difference whether or not a person lives to see the morning.

Even now, whenever I see a blur of frost on my windows, my teeth still clench together against the cold. Because I may be inside this cozy dorm room, but somebody else is out there in the cold.

I had a problem with alcohol. Sometimes the problem was I couldn't get any; other times the problem was I could. I started drinking because it's cheaper than heroin and legal for some people, even if it wasn't for me. You don't have to score it in an alley from a sleazeball who cuts it with quinine. You can steal it from Vons, or Pavilions, if you feel like a Chardonnay with an amusing bouquet. Usually I drank Ripple or Boone's Farm, but never Thunderbird -- the red wine of choice for an older generation of drunks. It's important to make your stand, even on the streets, where a bath is hard to come by, let alone an identity. But sometimes you can have your self when you can't afford soap. It's all in how you see what you're looking at.

Take the newspaper -- which is handy, if you want to know the news, or read the comics, or do the crossword puzzle. From what I find in recycle bins, most people who get them delivered throw out most of the paper read. You see a paper scattered around as nothing but a mess that somebody ought to clean up before the wind gets to it. Can you see those pages as I did, like a bed of autumn leaves, transforming a concrete floor into someplace warm and welcoming? A scattered newspaper is the sign of a home, and what could be more heart-warming than that?

When I carried the Mole's feet over the painted tar of the parking lot to the bridge that crosses the Pacific Coast Highway, I wasn't thinking about newspapers or signs or getting drunk. I was thinking about Johnny in his black leather jacket carrying the Mole's narrow shoulders. He had most of the Mole's weight but it didn't faze him. I had trouble

keeping up with him. I wondered where we were going, and what he planned to get out of it. I wondered about his face, too, which looked like he was having an argument with himself. His eyeballs were yellowish, where other people's are white. His irises were black and took up most of his eyes. They might have been dilated, but he didn't seem to be high or slow to respond, and he certainly wasn't chatting my ear off. I don't think I heard fifty words from him in the whole time we carried the Mole. When the lights got brighter, as we crossed over the highway, I could see he was only a year or so older than me. On the beach, under the pier, I thought he must have been older. Maybe it was the way he talked and how he handled the *cholos*. Maybe it was just that he seemed to know how things stood with you before you told him. I guess that's not such a trick at that, if we're all actually thinking the same thoughts.

Those Rocky Mountains must be awful high, because all the loose change in the country seems to roll to one coast or the other. They did a count recently for the Feds and found 953 homeless people sleeping in shelters, hospitals, motels, abandoned buildings, the city jail, on the beach, the Promenade and Palisades Park. They guessed 980 to 1,084 homeless people are sleeping in Santa Monica on any given night. Almost three-quarters are men, and half are Caucasian -- so a lot are middle-aged white men. Ten percent of the homeless people here are under twenty-four years old. There are 446 beds in shelters and such places in this city.

Now you know the problem. So what do you know?

I can hear your imagination churning already, but let me tell you straight out, no one in my family ever beat me up or tried to fool with my underwear. Me and my mama were doing pretty well together, until she got sick. I remember her, all right. Her name

was Alice. She left me with my grandmother when they took her to the hospital. Gran had a cat living with her named Gene LaFeet, mostly orange and black stripes, with two black paws. He used to get his back up whenever anyone passed by the window. But he was right to hiss at me, because Gran only had so much to eat, and as soon I showed up, she opened the door and told him it was time for him to feed himself. I moved in when I was eight, and lived with her for two years before she told me Alice wasn't coming back. A year later, we got more bad news. We had to take in Janis and LaToya, some cousins being dropped off by my Aunt Larisse. Jan was three and Toy was just a baby, but Gran had nothing more than she had before.

That's when I headed out after Gene LaFeet.

I don't talk about my first couple of weeks on the streets. I hardly remember them. I do remember feeling scared all the time, until I met a man called Gentleman Jim, who let me sleep in his cardboard box. He slept right behind me, with his arm over me. I would be lying if I said I never felt him go hard through the cloth of his trousers. But he never did nothing about it. I'm not saying I would've stopped him, either. I'm saying he looked out for me. He used to teach me things like, "We all got our desires. It's what you do about them that shows your character."

He was a character himself, who could sand-dance and whittle and taught me how to live *out of doors*, as he called it. He was a drunk, who stood around trashcan fires in empty lots at night, passing a bottle, when he had one. But he was also a truly gentle man with beautiful manners and hygiene. He always said, "Pardon," when he climbed outside to piss, and stood with his back to the street. He started me out writing postcards to Gran,

which I didn't want to do, because I hated to make her cry. He said all I had to do was find a funny one, from anywhere, and all I had to write was:

Still here. Love you.

Walker

He even paid for the first one. It said, *Greetings for Los Angeles*, and all you could see in the picture was a cloud of gray smoke and a guy in a gas mask. I wrote her address on the right side and those five words on the left, and I put on a stamp so it wouldn't arrive postage due. Jim taught me about that too. One night I came home to the fence where our cardboard box had been leaning. Someone swept it away, and Jim along with it. I haven't seen him since. But I look for him whenever I see two or three men around a trashcan, warming their hands at a fire.

I was thinking about Jim while we carried the Mole up the last brick steps and into the grassy patch that stretches for fourteen blocks along the top of the bluffs, which is called Palisades Park. Once inside, you face a cannon, eight tons of bronze from 1885, pointed straight at you. The message, to people like me, is unmistakable: *Are you sure you belong here?* It takes a certain courage to decide that the answer is *Yes* and to go on, into the park and the City of Santa Monica.

Behind the cannon, the park is narrow -- you can look all the way across the street at the Georgian Hotel. From end to end the park runs a mile and a half long, but only a few hundred feet deep, from Ocean Avenue on its eastern border to the edge of the bluffs on its west. Along the edge stands a fence made of concrete, reinforced with steel cables.

On the other side of the fence, a few trees cling to the jagged earth, but a lot of the cliff has eroded, and sections have fallen away. If you look over, you see a hundred-foot drop to the highway and on the other side some expensive real estate. The Jonathan Club is down at the foot of the California Incline, anchoring a row of long, narrow lots enclosing exclusive private homes. They say Jack Kennedy stayed in one of them, visiting Peter Lawford, when he was President of the United States. Marilyn Monroe lived up the road, in Malibu. From the highway they look like garages, but from above, in Palisades Park, you can see the length of them, with their tennis courts and swimming pools -- the whole California dream, right on a public beach.

We headed north along a winding path that runs more or less beside the fence. They were restoring the park that summer, adding trees and an irrigation system, fixing up the old paths. They didn't touch the big Canary Island Date Palms that line Ocean Avenue, except to trim the dried fronds under the live ones at top. But they cleared the stands of twisted Australian Tea Trees and Pink Melaleucas, and even the Mexican Fan Palms. We passed a structure called the *Redwood Pergola*, although the whole thing, from its benches to the turn-of-the-century lattice-work hanging over its ocean views, is painted green. We had to circle around the Rose Garden, which was being replanted, keeping ourselves to the western edge, wherever the path allowed, out of sight of the cars passing on Ocean Avenue. With every step we took, the Mole kept growing heavier, skinny as a toothpick though he was.

We carried him to the far end, to a stand of eucalyptus called Inspiration Point. Right in the middle a section had been closed off for construction. The fence was lined with big sheets of black plastic, so you couldn't see what was in there, except a yellow sign

that read *DANGER*, which means a cop will roust you if he catches you inside. Johnny didn't hesitate. He propped up the Mole's shoulders with one hand and unhooked the steel mesh from a pole with the other, holding it open for me to go first, carrying the Mole's knees. He warned me to be careful just as my feet started to slip on the soft, loose earth. Inside the fence a hole had been dug, about eight feet across and six feet deep, judging by the glint of light on the bottom and the *plink* of crumbling earth as it slid down into the water.

"That's the moat," said Johnny. "Keep to your left."

We made our way around the hole to a crooked wooden shack -- the kind they throw together with prefabricated walls. It had been built when work began on the site and left there when the job was interrupted. They were building a new bathroom at the north end of the park, but residents across the street didn't want one. They were afraid it might attract people like us. The contractor showed them his contract and said they had already had their chance to object to the project. Then they all went down to City Hall to argue about it some more. In the meantime, Johnny opened a space between the chain links and the pole and moved himself in.

"Here's the Crib," was all he told me that first night.

He tried the door, but it was latched, because there was no lock on the outside. Then he banged on it with the flat of his hand. Nobody home. He set the Mole down on the ground alongside the door and went around the back, where he got a wooden box with apples printed on it and propped it up against the side of the shack, under a narrow window. There were four glass slats in the window, and he took out three of them, lifting them carefully out of their braces. Then he hoisted himself up and wriggled through the hole. It

didn't look wide enough to pass his shoulders but he turned sideways and slipped inside. I heard him step on something with squeaky springs, and ask somebody inside, "Why didn't you open the door?" and then, "Well, I changed my mind, okay?" I heard a hook snap out of an eye inside the door, and then Johnny opened up his Crib to me and the Mole. He knelt down in the doorway.

"Pass him in here, will you? I can't do it all myself."

But he lifted the Mole out of my hands.

There was a fluorescent fixture overhead but no electricity, so the shack was dark inside when we closed the door behind us. Some light was coming through the window, and I saw a flashlight on a table, but he didn't touch that. Saving it for when he needed it, was my guess. The air smelled of cherry and sawdust, more faintly of sweat and vomit, although the last two could have been me.

The Mole was pretty banged up, which worked in his favor, because Johnny gave him the cot under the window. A girl was sleeping on it when we came in, but Johnny chased her off to make room for the Mole. He called her Annabel Lee. Her raggedy hair was blonde but had long streaks of brown in it. She looked to weigh about fifty pounds, and half of it hair. Johnny said she was all right now, and she moved off when he told her to. We lay out the Mole across the cot, and Johnny washed him with some water the blonde brought back from a bathroom down the park. The Mole opened his eyes and saw the stars through the window, and I knew he was going to make it. He could hardly move his right arm from a bruised rib, but he breathed in the air and *thanked his lucky stars*. I've heard people say that before, but the Mole actually mumbled *Thank you* to the stars blinking through that boxy window.

I don't want to give anybody the wrong idea about the Crib. It was a dangerous place. The yellow signs called it a hazard, and they were right. It was an eight-foot hole and a rickety shack, fenced off with mean-looking razor wire. The gate was padlocked, so the only entrance was the gap between the links and the pole Johnny had made -- and the inside was just a pit in the earth. It looked like a little concentration camp, plopped down on Inspiration Point. But once we were in the shack, with the silver hook in its eye, all the drawbacks worked for us. They made us safe. The fence and the razor wire and the gaping hole protected us. People pay a lot for that feeling of security, and we had no money to pay.

But we were talking about the night. Or I was talking about it and nobody was listening, which is often how it happens when you sleep out in the open. On that account I like Palisades Park, because the width is so narrow from the curbside to the cliff-side, the police can see the whole way from the window of a patrol car. They think they're after you, as someone to roust. But they also protect you from anybody who might take it into his head to rob you or worse as you lay sleeping. Old-timers sleep by day, so they can keep awake at night, when violent things usually happen. But most teenagers aren't ready to roll over on a bench and turn our backs on the day. We believe in the future. We believe the world was made for us too. We knock ourselves out by day, so we need to get our beauty sleep by night.

The problem is the parks in Santa Monica close at night. Most of them close at ten, but Palisades Park is open 'til eleven. After that, the first time the cops catch you, they'll give you a warning; the second time they give you a citation. You're supposed to pay that or show up in court. But nobody does, because nobody has the money to spare. So the

third time they catch you, they call in and find an outstanding warrant against you, which means they can arrest you. It's hard to prove that somebody is dealing drugs or turning tricks, but it's easy to prove they didn't show up for a citation. In Hollywood the cops issue jaywalking tickets, just to stick a warrant on you, like a tracer on an animal. Those warrants are nasty. They'll keep you out of a job or an apartment. Kids hide most of the time, on rooftops or wherever they can stay out of sight. The problem for young people is always the same: finding a place to be. That's why I loved the Crib. Between the natural defenses of the shack and its location in that particular park, we were safe from both the junkies *and* the police, at least for one night -- me and Johnny and Annabel Lee and the Mole.

Johnny is not his real name, and Annabel Lee isn't hers. I've got to call them something and might as well use the names they should have had. My mother liked to read too much, and she had no one else to read to but me. When she had to go down to the city for a job or food stamps and had no place else to leave me, she took me to the library. I can still hear her calm, quiet voice, trembling over the emotional parts, trying to pronounce each word so I wouldn't miss any. She had the patience of a schoolteacher, though she never finished high school. I am writing this now for her, for Alice, based on the scribbles I made in the half-empty pages of a notebook I kept for two years on the street. I found that book in a trash bin, with a hard green cover and the pages sewn in. It once held somebody's accounts, whose sales records were printed in columns on one side of each page. This is the other side.

3. Annabel Lee

When it looked like the Mole was going to live, I went outside for a cigarette. You can pick them up all over the beach, if you don't mind somebody starting them for you and wrinkling them like an accordion. Annabel Lee was outside the trailer, still inside the fence, sitting at the edge of the hole. She was wearing a thin cotton dress with tiny red roses all over it, and a thick parka on top of that, with the hood up. Her dress was stained with sweat by the neck, her eyes had reddish rings under them, and her cheeks were splotchy. Her thin wrists and hollow cheeks made her look like a junkie whore who would go down on her knees for a box of TicTacs. But she spoke like a lady when I offered her first a hit on my cig and then her very own butt.

"No thank you." She gave me what must have been a sweetheart smile, once upon a time. "I never smoke cigarettes. They're bad for you." This from a girl who had a road map of Los Angeles inside her arm. But little things count a lot with me, like a calm voice and good manners. I liked the way she said, "I do appreciate your offering it to me, Moses."

Johnny came out while we were talking. He squatted down on the edge of the hole, picked up a scrap of paper and tore it into shreds. He threw some into the hole, where they found the dirty water at the bottom and floated in a ring. He said, "We need more water," to Annabel Lee.

She didn't stir. "I thought you never brought anybody here."

"I brought you here."

"I remember."

"You do? I'm surprised you remember anything from last week."

She made a face as if she didn't want him reminding her of something. Or else she didn't want him bringing it up in front of people, like me. Either way, she did not want that conversation to continue and stood up, brushing off the back of her dress. "Where's the bucket?"

"Inside." But he said it too smugly.

"You fucker."

He grinned and rolled his head back. "Now you say."

She stopped at the door to the shack, narrowing her eyes. "Don't give me that. You could've had me anytime you wanted."

"How about now?"

"Except now."

"Now's when it counts."

"That's why you can't, now." She gave him a fake smile and disappeared inside.

He watched the door of the shack without saying a word. A minute later, she came out again with the bucket and started down the path to the bathroom. That's when he turned to me. "She could steal your left nut without waking you up."

"She's got a nice behind," I said, as a compliment. But he punched me in the arm. "If you go for that kind'a thing," I added, and he almost punched me again. But he didn't want to do that. Instead he picked an invisible nit off his jacket sleeve and unzipped the front, down to his waistline. His skin rippled over the belt loops and he puckered the ring around his navel so the silky black hairs stood up.

"You think I'm gay, don't you?"

"No," I lied.

"If you did," he gave me a sidelong once-over, "you'd be right."

"I don't think so."

"Uh huh."

I shook my head. You never agree to that.

"Well, I would be if I could be." He started to get angry. "I *should* be a faggot. It would make my life a whole lot easier."

That was a whole 'nother question. What you did to get by was one thing; your sexual preference is another. Preference has the word *prefer* in it. I prefer a Coke to a Pepsi when I can get both, but I'll drink either brand, even Vons Select, when I'm thirsty. He probably meant something along those lines. You have to be careful in jumping to conclusions when it comes to sex on the street. Still, the words she said when she stood in the doorway stuck out in my mind. "You never did her?"

"Never."

"Not once?"

"Maybe once. I don't remember. Not this time around."

I nodded. "She a lesbo?"

"Not unless she's compensating really hard."

The next question was tricky. I was asking about him, but I tried to make it sound like general interest on the street. I started with a shrug to say I didn't care, either way.

"Does that mean she's available?"

His eyes grew even darker, if that was possible. "Ask her for yourself," he said.

"Am I my sister's keeper?"

Most people don't realize that the answer to that question in the Bible is supposed to be *yes*. God just asked Cain if he's seen his brother Abel, right after he's killed him, and Cain is trying to be slick about it. But Johnny's saying it then left open a possibility that Annabel Lee might actually *be* his sister -- as in having the same mother. I had to nail that one down. "You two related?"

The question cooled him out. "Not cousins or anything. Closer than that, maybe, or not at all. I told you to ask *her*."

I didn't need to ask any more. He wanted me to ask her, which meant he wanted to know but didn't want to ask, which meant he cared what she thought about him, which meant she was off limits as long as I stayed in the Crib. There are plenty of girls in the world, but not so many places to lay down at night with a roof over your head. I had the answer to my question. We were working on his questions, now.

"If you don't mind my asking," I said, "why did you invite her here to your Crib, if you weren't going to do her?"

"I don't mind you asking me at all," Johnny said, his eyes lifting, almost laughing, "but I'll bet she would."

Annabel Lee came back with the bucket, filled to the top with water. She set it down on the edge of the hole, right next to Johnny. "There's your water," she announced, "straight from the piss-house. Any other jobs you got for me around here?"

She didn't talk so politely when she was talking to him.

He swiveled around so that his legs encircled the dripping bucket. "Not tonight," he said. "Are there any jobs you want to do?"

"Blow yourself," she said sweetly, and sat down on the roots of a tree a little way back from the hole, an arm's length and then some from either of us. She had her knees together and tucked her ankles in underneath her thighs, shifting over to one side to sit on her own feet. I've seen women do that, millions of times, but never once a guy.

Johnny swirled the water around. "Nice job."

"Fuck off."

He licked off his finger. "We still got to work on the language."

She started to get really mad. "I'm not your fucking pet, okay? I wasn't put on earth to amuse you. I appreciate what you done for me, all right? But that doesn't mean I'm gonna be your Indian slave for the rest of my life."

He gripped the bucket's rim in both hands. "Have I ever asked you to do anything you didn't want to do? That I hadn't done for you already?"

She looked at the bucket, glistening wet between his ankles.

"No."

"Thank you," he said. He closed his eyes -- leaned forward -- and kept going. His face went straight into the bucket, forcing water out over the lip on all sides. He made gurgling noises that got louder when he lifted his face out of the bucket. Silvery runnels slid down his cheeks, rounded his mouth, and leaped from his jaw. He wiped them on his jacket sleeve, but leather doesn't sop up moisture too well, and the water just moved from his face to his arm.

Annabel Lee was staring at him. "That's what we needed the water for?"

He offered her the bucket. "Want to wash up, next?"

"I did, already."

"Then it's your turn," he said, sliding the bucket over to me. "You've got a pink spot of vomit on your shirt you'll probably want to get. In the morning, you can walk over to Swashlock or stop off under the pier and get a regular shower. If you're going to be spending any time in the Crib, you need to start smelling better."

"Oh, Johnny," she said.

He folded my two hands together and sunk them into the bucket. "Did you know that the hands collect more germs than any other part of the body?"

"No," I said. It came out funny, like a croak, because I felt funny, watching him wash my hands in the cold bucket water.

"It's true. Isn't it, Annabel Lee? She used to be a nurse, you know."

"I did not."

"Okay, an aide, or something like that. She was."

"Don't believe anything he tells you," she said, though she wasn't looking at me. "He doesn't mean a word of it."

"She's right," Johnny said, and he was looking at me. "You can't believe a single word I say. For example," he said, and waved his arm, as if just about anything might have come out next. He shrugged, and his shoulders fell. "I'm in love with her," he said, to the trees. Annabel Lee frowned at him. He wasn't supposed to joke about that. But the wind picked up and the water in the bucket got cold, fast. She wrapped herself in her parka and went inside without bothering to deny it.

* * *

Sleeping arrangements in the shack had to be carefully negotiated, and that was hard to do, because they went unsaid. The Mole was already asleep on the cot by the window. A wooden table stood against the opposite wall, to your right as you came in the door. They must have laid out their construction plans on it, because the tabletop was full of pinpricks, and a red pushpin and a blue one were stuck into one of the legs. There was a round chair, like a stool with a curved back, that swiveled when you sat on it. Not good for sleeping. I crawled in under the table, and the cherry smell got stronger. It was sickly sweet against the wall, where I found four empty bottles of cough syrup: three Robitussin and one with a prescription label. I was trying to keep out of their way but left all the space between me and the Mole. Johnny and Annabel Lee had to divide it between them.

She came in first and curled up into her parka against the wall opposite the door. Johnny closed the door behind him using the metal hook, because there was no knob. He gripped a crossbeam on the lower half of the door and pulled that into place securely as possible before latching the hook and eye. There was a gap between the door and frame, above the hinges, that let the air in anyway. He stuffed newspaper into the widest part and let it go at that. Johnny looked to his left, where the Mole tossed on the cot, making wheezy noises in his sleep. The lump on his left cheek was swelling a wine-dark purple. Johnny looked to his right, where I was curled up under the wooden table. Then he looked across at Annabel Lee, who ignored him and buried her chin in her coat. Johnny sat down with his back to the door and stuck out his legs in front of him. His heels fell a few inches short of Annabel's Lee's elbows -- if those were her elbows inside the parka. She didn't budge. He drummed his feet a couple of times on the plywood floor. She opened her eyes and glared at him.

"What?" he said.

She closed her eyes again, and he drew up his knees in front of him, holding them with his arms around his ankles. I found it hard to sleep, for some reason -- the quiet or the security. For the first time in a couple of weeks I felt reasonably sure that no one was going to stab me in my sleep for my shoes or because they figured I had in mind doing the same to them. The funny thing was, I knew that Johnny had stabbed someone already that night. And had done it viciously, crawling out from the shadows of the pier to jab a broken bottle in Enríque's neck. But I could tell already, don't ask me how, that he wasn't going to sneak up on me.

I found myself with my eyes open, with nothing to listen to but the Mole's raspy breathing, and nothing to watch but Johnny and Annabel Lee. He studied the floor for a while, picked his toenail, and glanced out the window as the wind blew up and brushed a branch against the roof. He let his eyes roam around the room, from a bank calendar stuck on a nail, still showing May, to a spider web with no spider in it but a fly caught in the silk, until they settled on Annabel Lee, across the floor from him. He stuck out one leg again but kept the other in close, gripping his ankle in both hands. She didn't make a noise or open her eyes, so he slid out the other leg just as far. For a minute, that did it for him. He let his head drop back against the door, and you could tell how good it felt just to be sitting there. He spread out his toes and wiggled them every which way. She didn't stir, or acknowledge him, but didn't turn over either. She never turned her back on him, to sleep against the wall.

Just watching them like that gave me something: a peaceful soul, a preacher-man might say. It was like watching a sister and brother with a new toy between them, only

Johnny and Annabel Lee had something else going that sisters and brothers never do. Or they're never supposed to.

I must've fallen asleep sometime. But when I woke in the middle of the night, and remembered where I was, his feet were against the door and his head was lying in the curve of her hip, with his face buried in the dirty lining along the hem of her parka.

4. The Mole

There are two places you can get a shower if you're homeless in Santa Monica. There's a shelter on Fifth Street near the Big Blue Bus depot that lets people who aren't shelter members use the showers right next door from ten to one o'clock. That's called Swashlock. They have lockers too, so you don't get ripped off while you're lathering up. And there's a place under the pier that lets you take a shower before nine o'clock in the morning during the week. Street kids usually don't go where grown-up homeless people gather. It's too easy to get beaten, or robbed, or worse. But you've got to get yourself clean some time, don't you? I ran down Palisades Park just after dawn, took my shower in peace and quiet, and headed back before the most dangerous adults could sleep off whatever saw them through the night. I don't mind saying how good it feels to be tingly clean in the morning, with the salt air in your nostrils and the California sunlight drying off each droplet on your body.

Back at the Crib, I found another surprise: Annabel Lee was brushing her hair, getting ready for summer school. She asked me if I wanted to go along. Johnny was waking himself up, kneeling over the bucket to wash his face. By the way he stretched his arms and crossed them over his head, I could see he wasn't going to school, himself. But he wouldn't be telling me what to do. I had to make my own decisions.

"You think they would let me in?"

Annabel Lee nodded. "You look presentable, after your shower." She stood up the collar on my worn flannel shirt, as if that was all I needed.

"I'm not registered," I said.

"That doesn't matter," said insisted. "They got to teach you in public schools if you live in this city. It doesn't matter if you live in a Craftsman or a refrigerator box. That's the reason I came here."

I thought she came because Johnny invited her.

"To Santa Monica," she added, reading my mind. "I used to live in Hollywood. But the schools are better here."

The Mole was still asleep, but his breathing was quieter and more regular, and his face had more color in it. He had turned on his side during the night, which meant he was capable of moving around. "What about him?"

"What *about* him?" asked Johnny, sitting on the table.

"I don't think he's old enough for Samohi," Annabel Lee replied. She had a spiral notebook and a pencil with *Fisher Lumber* on its side.

"Somebody's got to take care of him, don't they?" I looked at Johnny.

"I was thinking of going for something to eat," he said, through a yawn. "I could bring you back some breakfast."

Annabel Lee couldn't decide whether to compliment Johnny or sneer at him. He was offering to feed somebody else, it was true; but was he doing it just to keep me from going along with her to school? Things get complicated once you start hanging around with other people. She couldn't bust him completely, since someone had to look after the Mole and she wasn't volunteering. But she couldn't go without some kind of disapproval, especially when she looked at me and saw that I was staying. She had on a pink plastic backpack with the Little Mermaid on it that was made for a six-year-old but somehow fit

her shoulders. She put her spiral notebook and her pencil in there and let the door bang shut behind her.

Johnny swung his legs around and slid off the table. "What'll it be for breakfast?" He had his finger in his palm, ready to take my order.

"Scrambled eggs and bacon?"

"I think we're out," he said. "I'll have to go look in the kitchen." He stuck his head under the table. "No-o-o, it looks like the larder is bare. We'll have to do something about that." And he headed out after Annabel Lee.

That left me alone with the Mole. It was the first chance I had to get a good look at him, so I knelt down alongside the cot to see what I could see. He must have been around fourteen, though age is hard to estimate when somebody hasn't been eating right. From the gray pallor of his skin beneath the bruises from the pier, it wasn't hard to see that his living conditions might easily have stunted his growth. The back of his neck was filthy, as it is with so many homeless kids. His ears were large and stuck out from his head as if he could wave them around, like blue-veined satellite dishes. His hair was cut short, the way they do in shelters when they think you have lice, with patches in spots. He had brown eyes with long, fine lashes, red rings under his nostrils, and a mole above the jaw, where it bends up to the ear. It was round, mostly black but brown along the edge. It looked almost like somebody had left a thumbprint there. But that was not why we called him the Mole.

When he first opened his eyes, they were bigger than I remembered, pale and moist and luminous, like those fish who live at the bottom of the sea. He blinked at me and raised his hand to block the light from the window. He sniffed a couple of times, leaning forward and squinting across the room. Then he climbed off the cot and crawled under the table to

the four empty bottles of cough syrup. He picked them up one by one and inspected their thick glass bottoms, until he discovered that one of the Robitussins wasn't quite empty. He drank it down and sagged against the wall, licking the last drops off his lips.

I told him to get back into the bed, and he did what I told him. I asked his name and he croaked out, "Henry. My Mama named me that." But something kept bothering him, more than the light. He blinked and held his forearm over his eyes, and finally confessed that everybody else always called him the Mole and allowed how he wouldn't mind if we did too.

Johnny had given me the job of looking after the Mole, and like all jobs I resented it at first. I had to wash his head and scrape his bandage clean, even feed him cold soup when Johnny brought us a can. After I got the hang of it I didn't mind doing it much, and later, when he started to act like himself, I felt a certain pride in his recovery. The Mole was able to stand after only half a day, though he never felt as comfortable as he did lying on his back on that skinny cot and staring out the window at the sky.

It took me a little while to find out why. Johnny told me to get him talking as soon as I could, because people who talk heal faster than the ones who lay silent all day on a hospital ward. The Mole didn't feel like talking, but I told him what Johnny said, and he asked me what I wanted to know. I asked him why he stared at the stars. He said that he was glad to see he was still above ground, and he didn't mean merely alive. He would watch those stars wink and blink, and the moon float across the sky, and he knew that the sun couldn't be far behind. He told me that the sky went on and on, forever. You could tell by his mouth when he said it that he loved the idea. At first I didn't get it. But Johnny

told me to get him talking, so that's what I did. The Mole felt he owed me something, and all he had was his story. It embarrassed him, but he told it to thank us for saving his life.

You have to understand: the Mole was born underground, to a community in a subway tunnel below the streets of New York City. He said five or six thousand people live down there. At first they seek shelter in the tunnels close to the surface, and then climb down, down, into the earth, to escape the violence at the upper levels. The world below the streets is a dangerous place, according to the Mole. In certain tunnels you have to press against the walls and step over tracks that can catch your ankle and hold you in the path of an oncoming train. And you have to keep away from the third rail, which carries enough juice to fry a person instantly. The Mole once saw a man's head explode. But among all these dangers, the greatest peril is still from other people.

Eighty-five percent of the subway dwellers are drug addicts, looking for a hit. The New York City Transit Police clear out the upper tunnels, closest to the stations. But the darkness lies like a blanket over the tunnels below, and, as they say in *Casablanca*, human life is cheap. The rule of law does not apply, except the law of people who huddle together. The Mole was born in a tunnel. It was first settled by a man named Zachariah, who turned his back on the world. Sometimes the Mole called him *my father*, though his mother was pregnant already when she first arrived. The rule of the tunnel was simple: the people looked out for each other -- which meant they killed anyone who wandered in and threatened their community. You could join them if you wanted to and the others approved. But once you joined, you couldn't go back to the surface without permission. And that meant Zachariah's. They had runners, whose job was to visit the surface and bring back what they needed, mostly food and drugs. The official rule was no crack or heroin allowed

in the tunnel, and for a while Zachariah made it stick. But the desire for it grew among some of them, and slowly the rule eroded. That meant more of them had to go to the surface to work the cons they needed to buy the drugs. And roving gangs had more motive to penetrate their tunnel.

The Mole never told us why he left that place. He didn't have to; we all guessed, anyway. His Mama must've died. She was a pretty woman who couldn't stand to see her reflection in a store window, so she went down underground into the dark where she'd never have to see her face. Like the men who go down to hide from themselves, because they can't support their own children. But the children who are born down there don't know any different, and the Mole called his childhood a happy time, even though he was three years old before he ever stood in sunshine, and ten before he left that tunnel for good. Once he crawled out of there, he couldn't get enough sun. He couldn't understand how it stayed up in the sky, and he swore he would never go down into darkness again. And he almost kept that pledge.

I didn't learn all that in our very first conversation. He only gave me the mine chart of his life. You have to know where the bombs are buried in order to avoid setting someone off when you least expect it. You didn't ask Annabel Lee about Hollywood or Johnny about his uncle, and you didn't talk to me about a certain disease. Those were the ground rules for getting along in the Crib. Everybody had to avoid his own sore points that never seemed to heal, like the Mole's ribs. Maybe they do, some time. I didn't worry about it, at sixteen.

* * *

Johnny came back to the Crib two times that morning. The first time he brought us a can of soup he must have filched from a supermarket shelf. I don't want to call him a thief. Maybe he picked it up at a shelter. Somehow he got a can of soup that he tucked in a pocket of his motorcycle jacket and brought home for me and the Mole. He set it on the table without saying a word and went to find something for himself to eat. It wasn't the kind of can where the top pops off, so I had to do something clever. Some homeless people carry a can-opener with them, but all I had was a church key, so I punctured holes all around the lid until I could fish out the star-shaped piece in the middle. I hung it up, using the mushroom soup on one side like glue. It glimmered on the wall where the Mole could see it without twisting his head around. Looking at it, he went back to sleep for a couple of hours until we heard somebody kicking on the door. For a minute I thought we had a problem, Houston. Who but the police make an entrance like that? I cracked the door and practically got knocked down when they kicked it open wider. I was making up a story already, when Johnny backed through the doorway with his arms loaded.

He was carrying a cardboard box filled with cans of pears and yams and peas, spaghetti with meatballs, franks and beans (with more franks inside than I ever saw), Mexican corn and tuna fish and sardines packed in oil. He had boxes of crackers and chocolate flavored breakfast cereal, a bag of bagels and a potato bread, and peanut butter. He had fruit too, bluish purple plums that smelled sweet even through their plastic bag. People who live in California have no idea how blessed they are with fresh summer fruit. You can get anything, all year long. That ought to make you blush with your peaches. The Farmers Market on Arizona Avenue brings more fruit and vegetables to two blocks in one

morning than I saw in ten years in Detroit. We used to walk up and down on Saturdays, the first time for samples they give you at the stalls; the second time for fruit that rolls off, or gets bruised, and they throw away in a trashcan because they have so much that's perfect; and the third time for the fruit they give away at the end, a little soft but awful sweet, just starting to spoil. But the box Johnny brought in -- he must have bought it in a supermarket. There was no way he could have stolen it all. The Mole sat up for the second time. Johnny offered him a plum, and the Mole took it, sinking his teeth into its purple flesh. The juice ran down his chin, and he wiped it with the back of his hand. Johnny took one bite of another plum, then offered it to me.

By the time Annabel Lee came in, we all looked like the cat who got into the jam. The groceries were still sitting in their bags in the box, and the box was still on the table. She took them out one by one, checked their prices if they had any stamped on them, and turned them around so that all their labels faced the room. When she had them lined up, the cans with the cans and the boxes in size places, she gave Johnny a close look. "Nice job of shopping," she said. "Where'd you get the money?"

He shrugged. "On the promenade."

"You sang for it?"

"I *spanged* for it. People were feeling generous."

"I'll bet." She frowned. "Didn't you make me promise not to?"

"We got some mouths to feed," Johnny said.

"Not like that."

"Like what? I *spanged* for it," he insisted. *Spanging* is short for spare-changing, what they used to call pan-handling. Don't ask me why they called it that.

“I’ll bet,” she said again.

“A quarter,” he said and held up his pinkie, crooking it for the contract. But she turned her back on him. She sat down where she slept, opened a book and started to read. It was for her class in summer school, a paperback with the word *USED* printed on a strip of yellow tape across the spine. It was *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck, a book Alice once read me. Annabel Lee refused to eat anything from the box -- not a spoon of sliced pears, when we had those for dessert. We let the Mole drink the heavy syrup, after we finished all the pears. She was standing on her principles, Johnny explained to me. At least until she got hungry, in the morning.

5. The Parking Structure

We had a feast that night, starting with the Mexi-corn. For a main course we had spaghetti with meatballs, according to the can, although the brown marbles mixed with the O's and sauce could have been just about anything. We still didn't have a can opener, so I used my church-key and added the tops to the star-field on the wall. The pears came in a bigger can, which looked like a sun when we stuck up its lid, with the others winking like planets around it. Annabel Lee went out while we were eating the spaghetti. She came back in time for dessert but didn't eat any and made a face when Johnny fished a whole pear out of the can and dangled it into his mouth. That night when we went to bed she turned her back on us and curled into the wall.

When we woke the next morning, Annabel Lee was gone. I got up first, about five-thirty, and there were only three of us in the Crib. Her pink backpack was also gone. Johnny was still sleeping against the door, and the Mole was asleep under the window. How she got out I don't know. I crawled over to the space on the floor opposite the door and it wasn't even warm any more. Behind me Johnny asked in a sleepy voice, "What are you doing, over there?" Then he saw I was alone and pushed the hair out of his eyes. "Where is she?"

I said I didn't know. Maybe she went for a pee.

"She wouldn't have taken the Mermaid along for that."

I thought maybe she liked to read in there.

Johnny was putting on his sandals already. "I don't want no drugs in the Crib," he said. "Understand? No drugs of any kind in here."

“Not even alcohol?” My tongue was getting thick and fuzzy dry already, and there was a pain gathering in my intestines. When he took the groceries out of their bags yesterday afternoon, I checked the empty box to make sure he hadn’t left a bottle of anything inside.

He shook his head. “If you do, you sleep it off someplace else.”

No alcohol or no Crib. That wasn’t an easy choice, but I wouldn’t have to make it all at once. No alcohol *right now* -- that was the decision. I was willing to give it a try, and see what happened. I don’t like to stay in any one place for too long, anyway. To my mind I had the easier problem. All I had to stop thinking about was a bottle of poison. Johnny had to stop thinking about Annabel Lee.

“She won’t score yet,” said the Mole.

I didn’t even know he was awake. But he was looking across the room at the bottles of cough syrup under the table, after spending two nights and a day with his nose in the mattress. Johnny looked at him as if the Mole might know something the rest of us didn’t. Or maybe he was just hoping it was true.

Desire is a killer. What you want and can’t have -- that’s what drives you nuts.

I learned from my Gran how not to ask for things: You don’t say what you don’t have unless you really need it. I learned from Gentleman Jim that everybody wants. It’s what you do about it that counts. But I’ve got only two things nobody can ever take away: a vocabulary, because Alice liked to read too much. And the knowledge that she loved me. Those make me something special on the streets.

Johnny wanted Annabel Lee, and it didn’t help that he had her. She wanted him, too, but she didn’t want to want him. Neither one ever knew that anybody really loved

them. So they tried to squeeze it out of each other all the time. The weirdest part is they had it, I think, but couldn't let it go at that. So they made each other prove it, or deny it, which was the same thing. It doesn't make much sense when you try to talk about it, but it *mattered*, because people live or die for this stuff. Annabel Lee went to bed hungry, across the shack from Johnny, to make a point to him about how much she cared -- about how she thought they should live. They spent a week together, before we showed up, in what I'd call *genuine intimacy*. Now they could barely speak two words without jumping down each other's throats.

Don't ask me why. Maybe they missed a particular closeness you only get for a short time. Maybe she was angry because all the things he promised her hadn't come true. Maybe he was angry because she still expected them. It's even possible that neither one of them was angry any more, but no one was willing to admit it without the other saying it first. Or because they didn't know how else to be together. Johnny tried, but he never explained it so I could understand what the problem amounted to between them. All I know is they couldn't be together for three days in a row without finding something to fight about. But they couldn't stay apart, either.

Annabel Lee kept trying. She stayed away all that day. Johnny hung around the Crib until eleven, saying she'd be back, and you could tell he didn't want to miss her when she did. Then he started to get antsy and said he was going for a walk, maybe see what was happening at the promenade. There was a movie he was planning to sneak into. He also wanted to get his sandals fixed or pick up another pair. I said I'd tell her he was there if she came by. He shrugged and said not to bother.

He was home by three o'clock, in a meaner mood than I'd ever seen him before. He told me he did sneak into the picture, and boy, had James Bond changed. The old ones like Goldfinger were really cool -- you could just imagine being there, driving those cars with machine guns on the side, sleeping with all the women, before they died. But things are different in Bond-land these days. His boss is Judy Densch. Whose fantasy is that? To answer to a middle-aged lady who keeps telling you to *grow up*? James Bond works for, like, his mother-in-law. All the female characters are three steps ahead of him. If you look at the line outside, you see who's buying all the tickets -- girls talking about Pierce Brosnan like he's the sex kitten. The only things left in the movie are the vehicles, and the Chinese spy drove her powerboat as fast as James Bond did. Faster. Johnny said the rest of the movie was just as bad.

I said I could see how that would put a crimp in his day.

He didn't even ask if she showed up.

The Mole was feeling a lot better by lunch, the second day. I could hardly keep him on the cot, like Johnny told me. He kept getting up on his knees and peering out the window, which would have had a nice view of the Pacific if not for the sheets of heavy black plastic covering the fences. As it was, all he could see was the sun over the plastic, and the reflection of the sun on the water through the plastic. That was enough for the Mole. When Johnny came in, he was jumping up and down on the cot, ready to break the springs. Johnny yelled at him to sit down. The Mole did what he was told in an instant. But his face looked so grave and frightened, Johnny started laughing. He said, "Don't you worry, little Mole. Nobody's going to put you back in a dark hole. Come on, we'll take you out to see the sun."

We went outside the shack, and the sun glared in our eyes. As you walk north through the park, the grass narrows at San Vicente and looks like it's coming to an end. But it widens again a little further, for one last stretch before the northern tip. That's where the Crib was, in a grove of eucalyptus they called Inspiration Point. It's a lonely, romantic spot. In front of it, palm trees lined Ocean Avenue, blocking our view of two luxury apartment buildings across the street. That's where they found the actor William Holden dead, like they did in his movie, *Sunset Boulevard*. Behind the Crib were smaller trees, then a concrete fence that kept people from stepping over the edge of the bluffs. The Mole went straight to that fence. On the far side you could see broken asphalt where the path through the park used to be, before the cliff-side crumbled and they moved the fence. Beyond the cliff was the Pacific. But the Mole turned his back on the ocean. He sat on the concrete crossbars and looked back at the Crib. He looked at the sun on the shack and the hole, surrounded by thick black plastic, as if that was all he could stand to see. Which gave Johnny an idea.

"You need to see the sun in all its glory," he told the Mole. "That doesn't mean on a plastic sheet. And not from the bluffs, either."

"The sun's right over there," I said, as if Johnny hadn't noticed it.

"Not *that* sun. Besides, we need equipment first."

"What equipment?"

Johnny meant for the Mole to *see* it, because the first stop we made was at Thrifty Drug, not my idea of a view. Johnny made us wait outside while he went in first alone. When he came out again, he said, "There's a rack of 'em in the back of the store, near the prescription counter. I've got the manager's eye already, and the next time I go in, he'll

watch me like a hawk. You take the Mole straight to the back, like you know what you're shopping for. Grab a pair off the rack, put 'em on his nose, and come straight back out. No looking around the candy aisle, at toys, or anything. Understand?"

"Sure," I said, "except for one thing -- put a pair of *what* on his nose?"

He looked at me. "What are we here for?"

I shrugged and turned to the Mole, but he didn't know either.

"Glasses," Johnny said. "Eyeglasses. The Mole can hardly see the sidewalk in front of him. Haven't you noticed him peering at things? I'd like to find his prescription, but we don't have time for him to try them on. All right?"

The Mole nodded. That didn't mean as much as you might think. You could ask the Mole if the whole world was made of Swiss cheese, and if you asked it in the right tone of voice, he'd nod at you, *sure it was*.

Johnny went back inside, and a minute later something fell over with a crash and tinkle of glass, and the store manager started hollering. Then we heard Johnny's voice: "If you hadn't'a pushed me right into it, I wouldn't'a touched it at all! I don't have nothing in my pockets from this store, or anyplace else either!"

That was our cue. We went into the store. Johnny was in the last aisle, farthest from the door, and someone was running his way with a mop, and the rest of the store was watching him closely. Johnny wasn't trying to run away, and when I caught his eye, he shot me a glance toward the back of the store. I grabbed the Mole's wrist and pulled him after me, down an aisle filled with ladies soaps and things, to the back of the store, where a prescription counter filled most of the back wall. There were condoms for sale on a carousel directly across from the register, and behind them, on a second carousel, those

eyeglasses with thick, black frames. Two pharmacists were behind the counter, but one was filling a prescription and the other was watching the commotion. I told the Mole to pick one, fast, and he lifted one off the carousel as if it might bite him. I tore off the tag and settled them on his nose, where they didn't look too bad. They were the kind with the line down the middle, for seeing near and far. I figured it was a bargain, getting two prescriptions instead of one. Maybe one of them would be his. We strolled back down the same aisle, stopping to sniff a bar of soap, before deciding that we didn't really need anything today and walked out empty-handed. To show how empty-handed we were, we went out playing patty-cake.

A few minutes later, Johnny joined us. The manager had held him long enough to search his pockets, and there was nothing inside any of them. They said things to him, like, "I can't imagine why anybody would want to look so guilty when he was supposedly innocent," but they could imagine or not imagine whatever they wanted; Johnny hadn't stolen anything. If he bumped into a display, people did have accidents inside stores, and they were following him closely. They couldn't think of a reason to have him arrested, except for not liking him inside their store. So they did the thing they really wanted to do when he first stepped inside. They threw him out.

"Bifocals?" he asked me. "That's what you picked for him?"

"That's what he chose for himself," I said, though it wasn't entirely true.

"We can try again someplace else," Johnny decided.

But the Mole seemed to like them, one half or the other, or else liked switching between them. He kept looking around, amazed at what he saw, stepping back from the

cars when he was a foot away, like they were going to spring to life and run him down. He looked at his own palm, turned it down, and turned it up again.

"Wow," said Johnny. "Huh?"

The Mole nodded.

"Now," Johnny said, once he had satisfied himself by peering through the lenses, "we'll really show you something."

He led the way to a parking structure on Second Street, off Arizona. It had an elevator, and I think the Mole believed that's what Johnny had brought him there to see. A woman waiting for the elevator decided she'd rather walk than ride up with us. We waited, but the elevator didn't come, so we went up the stairs too. It turned out that the Mole was pretty good with numbers. By the time we got to the top, he knew how many steps there were all told, how many between floors, and how many kids spent the night in the stairwell. There were a lot of steps, but we didn't mind. We were feeling good and could hardly wait for the surprise that was waiting for us on the roof.

You have to understand, the cars in the parking structures get all the best views in Los Angeles. Someday I'll write a book called *Parking Structure of Los Angeles*, with photographs. The view from the top of the Second Street structure is one of the best ever. You see the Pacific in the sunlight and the whole bay curved around it, miles out to sea. The City of Santa Monica spreads out under your feet, like a map on those carpets in the shelters. We took the Mole to the top floor, and he couldn't believe what he saw. He almost fell over the side from leaning out so far. Johnny stood against the stairway wall, as the Mole ran from one side to another, trying to explain. Johnny laughed at the Mole, and I did too, watching him go like a rabbit, his head bobbing and his eyes popping out. He was

so happy, he forgot about his purple face and ribs and the beating Ríque had given him. His whole mind was occupied by what he was seeing: the summer bay with sailboats and birds and the clouds in the background and a fringe of palm trees down below us, framing the scene. Off to the right, along the top of the bluff, we could see the black plastic sheets in the fence of the Crib, and the top of the shack, peeping over one corner. It was amazing, to see our whole world through the eyes of the Mole, who looked out, then looked at us and started laughing this weird laugh that sounded like *braaack*. Johnny gave it back to him: *braaaaack*. Every time he did it, Johnny would do it back and give me a wink -- and it broke us up again.

We were in fine spirits, and Johnny asked a guy with a girl for some money and when he gave him a quarter, said that just wouldn't do. The guy didn't want to look like a cheapskate in front of his girlfriend, so he gave Johnny a dollar bill, just to get rid of him. We spanged a few more quarters, working our way down the parking structure, until we had enough for two slices of pizza. We shared them, the three of us -- crispy crusts, with lots of cheese and oil on top, hot enough to burn your mouth with every bite.

The Mole kept right on laughing, no matter what we did, long after we had left the parking structure and were heading back to the Crib. *Braaack!* When we got close, we had to hush him up, when we thought we heard somebody moving around inside. Johnny climbed through the window and a minute later opened the door for us, but nobody else was inside. Johnny acted like he didn't notice, or didn't care either way. But if you knew him at all, you could see that he did.

6. Ghosts

The next two days were spent marking time, but we had fun while we did it. Johnny woke up talking about that Bond flick again. We were having Cocoa Puffs for breakfast, which were getting stale, and he said, "Pussy Galore -- now she was a real *Bondish* Bond girl. A blonde, in a leather jacket, flying fighter planes. She didn't like Goldfinger any better than Jimmy did, but she had a job to do and she did it. Period. What are they giving us nowadays for Bond girls? Industrialists and rocket scientists! I'm for girl power and everything, but you can't decide whether to nail them or start taking notes. Y'know what I mean?"

He addressed this question to the Mole, who crunched a mouthful of chocolate cereal with some difficulty, thanks to his teeth. "I've never seen a movie."

Johnny stared at him until the Mole's skin turned an odd shade of red and gray. "We're going to have to do something about that, aren't we?" Johnny started looking through the pages of the newspaper he was using as a mattress and found a movie clock for all the local theatres. He planned out a campaign, using a piece of charcoal on the tabletop to make his calculations.

The ticket booth and entrance to the AMC theatres are on the Promenade, across from the Mann, but the exit is around the corner on Arizona. They always post an usher there when the movies let out, at the top of the escalator from the underground theatres. No way to sneak in that door when a movie lets out. But there's another exit downstairs, at the bottom of the escalator. It empties into the alley, and they never saw the point of posting an usher by that door. Most people who pay for the movies go out the side door

on the street level, around the corner from the pizza shop on the Promenade. Almost nobody uses the other door, which takes you to a lonely place in the alley. Who would lurk out there, where homeless people might hit you up for change?

We would and we did, by Johnny's calculation twenty-three minutes before the two-fifteen showing of *The Sixth Sense* was scheduled to start. He chose that showing because twenty minutes earlier, the *Pokemon* movie let out. That was the kind of movie that would bring a morning crowd, and Mom and Dad might not want Junior to see the pizza shop around the corner before they had a nutritious lunch at home. They might sneak out the back door, into the alley, directly on the way to the Second Street parking structure. They might be surprised to see the three of us waiting there, but if we didn't ask for money, and only caught the door, they would be happy enough to keep on going to their SUV in the structure.

No movies were starting then, so nobody was on the lookout. Once you turn the corner, the ushers working the downstairs candy counter can't see if you've just stepped off the escalator or slipped in through the back door. We could've tried to sneak into a theatre right away, but that might have raised suspicion. Instead, the three of us crossed the lower lobby to the men's room at the far end of the candy counter and made a lot of noise in the bathroom. When we came out and passed the candy counter again, they went into the bathroom to make sure we hadn't done any damage inside.

By that time, the middle theatre had been cleaned, and we walked in to snag the best seats for the next show of *The Sixth Sense*. There's no problem with ticket holders during the morning shows, because those don't sell out anyway. That's why they sell reduced price tickets, what they call bargain matinees. Did you think they were doing it to

be nice? Johnny said the three of us were just taking a bigger discount on a matinee, and why should they mind? We weren't keeping anybody else out of a seat, and they were running the picture anyway.

We saw *The Sixth Sense* movie and it was really scary. Not scary compared to living on the streets, but creepy, all about ghosts. This boy kept seeing ghosts all the time, and that was too close to home for me and the Mole. Johnny kept running his arm behind me and tapping the Mole's shoulder during the creepy parts, to make the Mole jump around in his seat. In the middle, Johnny got up and wandered the aisle, stopping to chat with one movie-watcher after another, asking if they were done with their popcorn. Somebody finally gave him a bucket just to make him go away, so we had a quarter of a large popcorn to share. Then Johnny showed us the greatest thing: they fill it up again, if you ask. I don't know why everybody isn't always filling up their bucket over and over. We did it twice before the counter man said he didn't remember us buying any popcorn in the first place. But he'd seen us so many times and we made such a pest of ourselves, it never occurred to him we might have sneaked into the theatre.

The Mole came out of the theatre blinking even more than usual, his eyes filled with stardust as well as sunshine. We came out the side door on the main level and rounded the corner to the promenade like everybody else. He sat down on the low wall around the pizza place and wiped off his bifocals. He put them back on his nose, peered through them, and folded them away in his pocket. He'd seen enough for one day, he said, and didn't want to see too much more until he had a chance to think about what he'd already seen. He sat down on a black iron bench and covered his eyes with his hands.

I sat down next to him.

Johnny was standing over us, one sandal propped up on the front of the bench. He said, "What do you want to do now? We could scare up a little change in a hurry, if the three of us worked different corners. Or I know an Italian place that dumps the pasta from the lunch shift about now, to make room for the dinner batch. If we go over there and watch them toss it into the dumpster, they'll probably give us some."

The Mole said he liked spaghetti with ketchup.

Johnny shook his head. "That's because you never tasted any, cooked up right. They put all kinds of stuff into sauces. Clams and scallops and what-you-call-it, fish that looks like crabmeat -- " But his lesson was over before it even got started, because he recognized someone halfway down the block toward Santa Monica Boulevard. We could only see him from the back, cropped blond hair with black spikes in front, but that was enough for Johnny, who leaned past me, craning his neck for a better view. The guy was in his twenties, in a blue Hawaiian shirt with big orange flowers, like birds-of-paradise. Johnny stood on the bench and called over the heads of fifty people, "Piet?" Then louder, "Hey, Piet!"

It looked to me like the Hawaiian shirt turned, saw something, and ran. Or maybe he didn't see anything but heard his name and ran. Either way, he ran, and Johnny ran after him. Which meant that the Mole and I had to run after them, too. We flew down the block, crossed Santa Monica, pushed our way through the crowd between Puzzle Zoo and Yankee Doodle's, and spotted them down by the Odeon. The Hawaiian shirt kept going and so did we, across Broadway and into the indoor mall designed by Frank Gehry. The sunlight flashing on the glass doors covered his tracks, and by the time we burst into the food court, Piet was gone.

Johnny was not ready to give up so easily. He ran down to the central plaza, where the escalators are, but didn't see him. The Mole and I were out of breath, but we followed him doggedly up the escalator to the third floor, two moving steps at a time. Johnny checked out the corridors, stopping in at the toy store and CD store and Suncoast Video, and calling down the others. "Hey, Piet!" he screamed. "It's me. Johnny Dee." But no one showed except the security guard who told us to shut up or get out of the mall. Johnny was ready to give him an argument, but the guard had a stick and walkie-talkie and I dragged Johnny out of there before he used either one.

From that moment on, the day turned sour. Johnny didn't feel like Italian food, and wasn't in the mood to spange. He headed straight back to the Crib, kicking over the trashcans that stood in his way. The Mole and I kept close enough to help if he needed any but not so close that anybody thought there were three of us making trouble on the Promenade. He crossed Ocean Avenue at Wilshire Boulevard without bothering to look at the traffic, and almost got the two of us killed following him. I said a silent prayer to Saint Monica as we passed her statue in the park, like a big dildo watching over Wilshire Boulevard. Old people strolling in Palisades Park gave us looks and said things to each other about young people today. We caught up with him at Montana and grabbed him by his elbows, to stop him banging around the park before anybody complained to the cops. Johnny was still angry but couldn't blame us for that, and by the time we saw the black sheets over the fence, he was able to recover enough of his old self to wait until the path was empty before slipping inside the Crib.

There was still no sign of Annabel Lee inside, and that didn't improve his mood any. We ate the last can of spaghetti and he ate another of creamed corn by himself,

making noises to the can that we couldn't hear. I kept saying, "What?" and he just shook his head like I was listening in on a private conversation. The Mole didn't say a word except to ask if he could lick the inside top of the can. We left Johnny alone in the Crib and went outside ourselves to watch the sunset.

The sunsets at Inspiration Point have to be the most brilliant in the United States. The park sits over the beach and the ocean. The sun sets in the west, and the Pacific is our western ocean. The sun sinks in a bay dyed pink, purple and every shade in between. The sky is just as many shades of turquoise and blue. At a certain time the birds on the coast get the signal and they all start flying in one direction, as if they were changing the guard on the beachfront. You hear their calls, thousands of them, just as the sky turns darker and darker blue. After the sun drops into the water, you can still see its reflection in the clouds, like a halo of pinkish orange in the sky. That glow burns out, the purple turns to black, and all of a sudden you realize the stars have been hanging there all along. They say the air pollution makes the sunset glitzier. But you have to be grateful to the smog for a sight that takes your breath away, no matter how many times you've seen it. We saw it every single night that summer, sunset after sunset and all a little different, so that you hardly notice unless you look. It must be like that living with Halle Berry or Miss America. You can't keep telling yourself how pretty they are and can't keep telling them. So you think, "Oh yeah, the most gorgeous woman in the world just walked by, taking out the garbage." It's the same with sunsets in that park.

Johnny came out and sat on a picnic bench with us, keeping his back to the ocean, watching the people leave the park. The wind picks up, and the birds sound different, and you have an idea to button the top button of whatever you happen to be wearing. Johnny

unzipped his motorcycle jacket and let the wind have his stomach. He was sitting low on the bench, with his legs spread apart. "Look at them go," he said. "They don't even know they're missing the best part."

The night has a terrible beauty. But that wasn't when he said it.

I was thinking about writing in my notebook about Piet, but didn't really know enough about him. I wasn't about to bring up his name to Johnny. Instead I started on my own Piet. "I used to know a guy who figured one good sunset was worth three and a half baked lasagnas. And this was somebody who really loved lasagna. He said you could always find something to eat. People make food. But there's no one on earth, not even Oprah or Donald Trump, who can order up a sunset."

Johnny's habit was to try to see the other side. "They can go to a sunset," he said. "The sun is always setting somewhere."

The Mole looked at him as if he hadn't known that before.

"Somewhere in the middle of the ocean," I said. "Not always on land."

"They can rent a helicopter," Johnny said.

"And hover over the ocean? Watching the sunset? Who'd want to do that?"

"They could," Johnny insisted. "That's all I'm saying."

"That's not what he told me, this guy," I said. "Gentleman Jim. He was a pretty smart fellah, and I think I'll stick with his opinion."

Johnny looked at me strangely, maybe because it was the first time I hadn't agreed with him. "He taught you a lot? When you first got out on the streets?"

I didn't say anything.

"Uh huh," he said. "Well, maybe they wouldn't take a helicopter, since they could wait and see the sunset the next night wherever they were. I mean, I can see his point, this Gentleman Jim. Because they probably live in a nice place, anyway. And you know when it's going to come around again."

"Right," I said, and that was all. The Mole didn't talk too much, and I was willing to wait forever, if I had to.

"I knew a guy like that," said Johnny finally.

"Like what?" asked the Mole.

I shot him a look, but Johnny didn't notice. "His name was Peter, in Minnesota. He called himself Piet when he got out here, after an artist who only painted black lines around colored boxes. Mon-drian." He said the name halfway up his nose. "I was living with my uncle and a Doberman in this one-bedroom condo in the Marina. My uncle is a macho man, or thinks he is. He used to bring home treats at night -- for the Doberman. The three of us slept in the bedroom, at first. Then it got crowded, so he moved me out to the couch. And I just kept moving. Every time I phone him, he tells me to come home. But he doesn't say it like he's trying to change anybody's mind, and that's the only time it occurs to him.

"Piet wanted me. He was into hustling and kept telling me how much money I could make on the stroll. I told him I wasn't into men. He said nobody was into the kind of men you met on the stroll. He asked me if I'd ever done a girl just because I could or threw anyone a sympathy fuck. He said it was like that. You did them as a job. It wasn't about what you wanted for yourself. That's where I came in. He really wanted to sleep

with me. He took me in and showed me how to live on the streets, and all he asked from me was to sleep with him. But I wouldn't.

"I told him I wasn't into that, and he understood. He never tried to push me or make me feel guilty. He never stopped helping me, either. He said somebody once helped him, and Piet thought of that guy whenever he helped me. I'm sure they used to do it, but he never brought it up again in all the time we hung out together, which was almost two years.

"The only thing I regret was not sleeping with him. I mean, I did love Piet, and isn't that what it's supposed to be for, anyway? It would've meant a lot to him, and maybe to me too, even if the sex part wasn't the highlight of my evening. It doesn't matter now, because he got so sick, I had to take him to the hospital. I went to see him, but I hate the smell of a hospital. He reached a point where he told me not to come back. He didn't want me to see him like that, and the truth was I didn't like seeing him with the tubes and everything, either. One day I get a visit from a caseworker who tells me that Piet died overnight. I don't think they would lie about a thing like that, but I never saw his body all laid out, and every once in a while I still think maybe it's him on the street.

"Is that what you were wondering about, Walker?"

I figured he'd allow me one more question, so I had to jump a few. "Is that why you saved the Mole?"

Johnny laughed. "They were calling him names, remember? Like *faggot*, *pussy*, *cocksucker*. I don't like to hear those words used badly."

7. Nicky and Tiff

At ten o'clock that night, Annabel Lee finally came home. She had two younger girls with her and a suitcase between them. They looked around without saying a word, as if they had entered a cage in the zoo and something might jump on them. Johnny must have looked like the wildest cat, even though he ignored them and turned his black eyes on Annabel Lee. He tried to ask her casually, "Where have you been?"

She said, "Taking care of myself."

"Getting a pedicure?"

"Taking a bath," she said, which calmed Johnny down some. There are a couple of places she could go for a shower, but if she wanted a bath, she had to go to a church. They probably gave her a meal and a bed and a lecture, too. It was some kind of price to pay for leaving us guessing what had happened to her.

"Who are these two, then?"

"Nicky," she said, tipping her head at the big one. "And Tiff." They didn't look like a Nicky and a Tiff. Okay, maybe Nicky might have: she was the older sister, who appeared about forty years older, even though she was fourteen. It turned out their whole names were Nicole and Tiffany, which I liked better than their nicknames. Tiffany was eleven. Nicole had shiny brown hair, which she pulled straight back, wrapped in a rubber band, and twisted around in a bun. It made me think of a librarian. Tiffany looked like a doll in a red plaid dress, like one in a book, *The Lonely Doll*. Alice once read it to me. The book came with a doll in the store, but we never saw any doll. Tiffany had red hair, and she was wearing hiking boots.

"Bath-mates?" asked Johnny.

"Some people I found on the street." She had stopped looking at him, trying to shove Tiffany's pillowcase back under the wooden table where I had slept both nights. She turned to me, and I thought she was going to ask if I minded, but instead she told me to open a can of ravioli with my church-key. None too politely. When I didn't budge, she softened up. "They have no place else to go, Moses." Then she turned to Johnny and said, "I'll make the can good to you."

"How?"

"One way or another."

He waved his hand. "Keep it."

"No thank you. We'll only take it as a loan."

But the fact that she accepted it was some kind of a victory, and Johnny felt better anyway. When he felt good, he was generous. He shrugged and gave her a smile that said, *Call it whatever you need to.* "What's mine is yours, Baby Doll."

She didn't like the sound of that. She started spooning raviolis out of the can for Tiffany, but stopped long enough to ask Johnny, "I can't but you can -- is that it?"

"Nobody can. Nobody should. That's what we said."

"Then tell me where you got the groceries."

He opened his mouth, closed it, and sighed through his nose. "All right," he said.

"We needed them, that's all."

"That's what I said. I can't but you can."

Tiffany had watched the raviolis as long as she could. Even though Annabel Lee still had the fork, Tiffany picked one up with her fingers and crammed it into her mouth. Nicole came over and wiped her sister's fingers on a wad of tissue paper.

That must have reminded Johnny of something, once. He stared at Annabel Lee, clenched and unclenched his jaw. "Where have you been?"

She fought with herself, wanting to tell him nothing, but unwilling to risk his sending them away. From where I sat, it wasn't yet clear that he had the right to do that, but he had the power, because Johnny believed he had the right, and he was willing to throw the shack into the hole with all of us inside it, to prove his claim. He was a man of principle. But Annabel Lee also had her principles, and one of them was that any guy who did something she didn't like had no rights at all.

"Out," she said.

That's a fighting word. You use it with a parent. I saw the anger rise in Johnny, welling up from wherever the violence began.

Nicky must have seen it too. She said, "We don't have to stay here. We were all right on our own."

Johnny looked at her, and she fell silent again. She thought he was threatening her, but I knew what he was thinking. He could tell she was trouble. She was wearing a leather jacket, a cashmere sweater, and designer jeans tucked into black riding boots. We both knew people who would have killed her for the jacket alone. Tiffany was standing with one hiking boot on top of the other, watching them carefully. Annabel Lee gave her a tight smile, but Tiffany looked worried. Her big green eyes moved from her sister to Johnny and back again.

"Were you really?" Johnny asked Tiffany. *All right on your own?*

She shrugged, and looked at me -- over to her sister, and finally at Annabel Lee. She knew a lot was riding on her answer, but didn't know what Nicole wanted her to say. "We might've been cold, sometimes, out on the street." She glanced over at Nicky again. They couldn't deny that. And then something happened, that stirred the bravery in her. Maybe our attention gave her confidence. She looked Johnny in the eye and said, "But it doesn't look so warm in here, either."

Johnny grinned. "Maybe you should go."

Tiffany turned to her sister, her eyes going wider. Had she said the wrong thing?

I think that's what decided Annabel Lee.

"I didn't," she announced. "I didn't do it. All right?"

You could see Johnny's shoulders unbunch. "Whatever you do is your business," he told Annabel Lee. "Whatever I do is mine."

Right," she said.

He didn't want to be agreed with, in that. "Except for one thing."

"I told you I didn't. You want to check?"

Nicky sighed, "Come on, Tiff. It's time for us to go."

Tiffany looked anxious, until Annabel Lee took the girl around by her shoulders. "Don't be silly," she said. "You stay right here." She turned to Johnny. "You can be such a prick, can't you? They can't get into a shelter any more tonight. You had a point to make and you made it, all right? Don't take it out on them. You know what that feels like. They didn't do anything to you."

Johnny made a face -- half a face, really, since it only curled up half his mouth. You could see the strain on him from having somebody around who knew him so well. He asked Nicole, "Is anybody out there looking for you?"

"Maybe," she admitted.

"As in, maybe the sun will come up tomorrow?"

Nicky gave him a nod, straight off. She wasn't buying a place to sleep with a lie. You had to like her for that. Tiffany's answers had earned some points, too. I didn't know if I had a vote, but I knew how I would cast it.

"Where are you from?" Johnny asked. Nicky didn't answer, so he added, "How far away from here?"

Nicole glanced at Annabel Lee, who shrugged, as if to say she didn't know where he was going with this, either. Nicky said, "Brentwood." An expensive town northeast of Santa Monica. Johnny scowled as if that made things worse.

"When did you leave?"

"Three days ago."

"Unexpectedly?" He was looking at Tiffany's dress.

"I was planning to go. She wasn't."

"Any chance you could say you're sorry and go back there?"

Nicky shook her head. She was trying to sound matter-of-fact about it but wiped something out of the corner of her eye -- maybe a speck of dirt. "We won't need to be here long. Not with you, anyway."

"Why not?"

"I've got a *plan*," she told him. Johnny liked her getting down to business. "Our dad had a sister in Oklahoma. If we went there, she'd have to take us in. But we can't go right off, since it's the first place they'll look. We can't go anywhere yet, because they'll find us if we do. We need to disappear for a while -- maybe a couple of weeks. Then, when they've tried every place and can't find us, they'll stop looking, and we can go out to Aunt Emily in Tulsa."

"So what are you planning to do for the next couple of weeks?"

"Get a job."

Johnny knew what that meant better than Nicky did herself. But he didn't feel it was his responsibility to explain it to her. "Where?"

"In a movie theatre."

The last two words had a profound effect on the Mole. If she had said, *Shazam!* she couldn't have worked more powerful magic. One minute he didn't care if they stayed or went, or if he never saw them again. The next, he wanted to adopt them as his sisters. You could tell what he was thinking. Knowing somebody who works in a movie theatre is like a free ticket to heaven, and not only for sneaking in. They have a candy counter in a movie theatre. He looked at Johnny silently, who burst out laughing. "*Barrack!*" he told the Mole, who grinned back uncertainly.

Then, from behind him, we heard another "*Barrack*," and realized it came from Tiffany. She gave us a hundred-watt smile. Nicky looked shocked, but Annabel Lee saw it was going to help and played along, patting Tiffany's back. "Excuse us!" she said and turned to Nicky. "See what happens to their manners, after two days on their own? Right down the toilet."

Nicole wasn't sure what that meant. "We can stay the night?"

Annabel Lee gave Johnny a very hard look.

"A couple of nights," he told her.

"At least," said Annabel Lee.

"On condition that she finds a job," Johnny insisted.

"In a movie theatre," added the Mole.

I started to laugh, but Annabel Lee shot me a glance and it stuck in my throat. She said, "None of you have jobs."

Johnny held up two hands in surrender. "Point taken, Counselor." He told me, "Let the record reflect that." And then to her: "Okay? Now -- if the defense will rest for the evening -- why don't we call it a night?"

* * *

Sleeping arrangements that night were more complicated among six of us. The Mole thought he would give up the cot, but Johnny told him to stay there until his bruised rib healed. Annabel Lee threw out the empty bottles of cough syrup and tucked Nicky and Tiff beneath the table. That left her, Johnny, and me to share the middle of the floor. I wasn't about to lie down in Annabel Lee's spot, and Johnny usually sprawled out over all the space by the door, so I didn't know where to put my own pack down. Annabel Lee solved the problem for me by taking my bag out of my hand, setting it down on her side of the floor, and fluffing it up like a pillow. Then she sat down with her back to the door,

right next to Johnny. She wrapped herself in her parka and snuggled up against his hip. He didn't say anything about it, but starting wiggling his toes.

The rest of us closed our eyes and didn't hear anything, either. When I opened mine again, in the middle of the night, the two of them were sitting up sleeping with their backs against the plywood, keeping the wolf from the door. In the morning there was a lot more activity, with people going in and out, whispering and stepping on you. And we had a lot more mouths to feed.

8. The Pier

By the time I opened my eyes the next morning, we were organized like an army. Annabel Lee was the drill sergeant or the sergeant master, whatever you call the honcho who gives out marching orders. Johnny was already gone. She didn't tell us where. She just said that Nicole had to prepare for her interview, and then go to her interview at the movie theatre. Tiff would be spending the day with Annabel Lee, giving Nicky the space she needed to land the job. The Mole and I weren't assigned anything exactly, although all we had for breakfast was a can of Mexicorn, and Annabel Lee told us if we planned to eat that night, somebody ought to do something about it.

On Saturday mornings at nine o'clock you can go to the City Hall lawn, where organizations like Food Not Bombs come to feed the homeless. You stand in line for a plate served to you from big aluminum tins they prepare ahead of time. Annabel Lee thought we should go there, since it was a way to make sure that Tiffany started the day with a meal. It means you have to stand with a lot of homeless adults, who give you looks like you're eating their food and maybe you've got something else that belongs to them, besides. There's a place at Seventh and Colorado that gives out bag lunches to the first hundred people who line up by nine o'clock, or until the food runs out. I never go there, because the people at the back of the line are always sure you're going to take their lunch. I like the scene in Palisades Park, at four in the afternoon, where you can get a meal if you haven't been able to find one for yourself. A guy called Father Dollar shows up sometimes who hands a dollar to every homeless person he sees. Now that's what I call *charity* -- a dollar for anyone, no matter who they are.

Breakfast at City Hall gave a nice a start to the day, but we still had to find food for the rest of the Crib. We brought a plate back for Johnny, who wasn't home yet, so the four of us finished it off between us. Then we discussed what to do next. The Mole was in favor of going through the trashcans in the alleys by the Promenade, while I thought we might take a shot at spanging on the movie lines. Annabel Lee wanted to take Tiff to the pier. She reminded us it was Saturday, and there should be a lot of people on the pier. That was close enough to an invitation for the Mole, who wanted to go along with them. I'd spent time on the pier but thought it might be fun to watch the Mole see it by daylight. And there was Tiffany, who sounded like she knew all the rides by heart but was ready to try them again for the hundred billionth time.

The Santa Monica Pier juts out from the southern end of Palisades Park, where Colorado Boulevard meets Ocean Avenue. All we had to do was walk the length of the bluffs. It's very pleasant in the morning, walking along the path, when only the joggers are out in their sweats and headbands, and of course the homeless folk curled up at the roots of palm trees or on benches, with splendid daybreak views of the Pacific. You pass wooden structures with no purpose but to look interesting, a senior citizen's center, an information booth, and Camera Obscura, which is some kind of camera looking out over the ocean. The city keeps the grass mowed and carries away the palm fronds that fall from the trees. Sometimes you see a couple of Mexican guys with a power saw dangling from the top of a palm tree, a hundred feet in the air, buzzing off the dead fronds that clump beneath the living leaves. The old fronds fall, stiff and brown, with jagged edges. Across Ocean Avenue you can watch the city coming to life, people approaching cars that beep and light up, happy to see them. At the northern end, condos and hotels line the eastern side of the

avenue, but as you near the southern end, close to the pier, you see the Crocodile Café and fancier restaurants, like Ivy at the Sea. We never crossed the street, but stayed in the park, past the old bronze cannons, until we turned onto the long, curving walkway over the highway that led to the carousel and the boardwalk.

There weren't many people crossing onto the pier when we did, just a woman in a jogging suit who pumped her arms and made faces as she passed us from behind. She huffed and puffed to the very end, where she circled under the cawing gulls and ran back again. That's what you do, I guess, when you don't have anything else to worry about, when the problem you've got is too much food and no way to burn it off during your day. We were facing the opposite problem, so we crossed to the pier taking our own sweet time. We couldn't have moved faster anyway, with Annabel Lee holding Tiffany's hand. Annabel Lee was doing the holding, because Tiff would have run across the walkway, never mind the cars on the roadway to our left.

On the far side of the road was the building with the carousel inside and Tiffany had to go there, first thing in the morning. The tickets are fifty cents apiece, and Annabel Lee told us she would pay for me and the Mole, if we wanted to ride along with Tiffany. I wouldn't do it, but the Mole did, who sure looked goofy going around on a horse, while the music played and Annabel Lee waved to both of them. She put Tiff on a horse next to the Mole in a row of three. But her horse didn't go up and down, and Tiffany climbed off in the middle of the ride to switch to a horse on the outside ring, in front of the Mole. Annabel Lee almost had a heart attack, when Tiffany climbed off in the middle, but she got onto another horse safely and went round and around with the Mole chasing her heels but never catching her.

It was hard not to get caught up in their excitement. I had a quarter in my pocket and went over to a machine against the wall with a statue of Madame Estrella inside it. For a quarter she gives you a card with your personal fortune on one side and a chart of birthdays, signs, birthstones, and flowers on the other. My fortune said, *Hear no evil, See no evil, Speak no evil. If you follow this golden rule, life will be so much pleasanter for you. You are a very loveable person and have a very forgiving nature. You have had some trouble, but time will temper it. Beware of a dark haired one who is jealous of your success in life and will try to make trouble for you.* It was a lot to consider.

There are forces for good and forces for evil, both in this world. Half the time they don't know themselves which one they are. You can wise up, shut yourself off, and grow old and sad in a hurry. Or you can keep an open mind and hope for the best. I knew they put those cards in the machine before I came along, but it was my decision to pop in a quarter in time to get that card. So, for my money, it has as much to say about my future as a tarot reader on the beach or a horoscope in the paper. Astrologers print one fortune for a million people who read the morning's paper, but they can't all have the exact same fortune, can they? While the card from Madame Estrella was for me alone, about my life -- for half the price of a carousel ride. Turns out my flower is the morning glory and my birthstone the sapphire.

When the carousel ended, Tiffany wanted to get some fresh-made potato chips, or else get her picture taken with a cardboard standup Wicked Witch, or get a ticket for the roller coaster. The Mole looked ready to go right along, until I reminded him that we had a job to do. There were people starting to show up by then, wandering out of a breakfast place on the opposite side of the pier. Joggers were struggling down the walkway, and

fishermen baiting fishhooks at the end of the pier, on platforms close to the fish. There wasn't a lot of action at the souvenir booths or photographer, but couples were starting to stroll down the boardwalk, and that was our call to action. We had to find a spot where they passed slowly enough to notice us, but the merchants wouldn't chase us off too soon. Finding just the right spot can be harder than you'd think.

There's a booth that sells rocks, minerals I guess from the ocean, dried sea horses and things you can put in a little box with a wad of cotton to give somebody back home so they'll wish they went along with you. I don't know who buys that stuff, since you can pick it up yourself if you wait long enough, but there's always a crowd inspecting pieces of turquoise and amber and tiger's eye. Then there's a gap along the north side of the pier where coin telescopes point toward the mountains at the far end of the bay. The Mole and I chose one telescope, which he pretended to look through, while I stood behind him, waiting my turn. When a kid came along with a quarter, I could ask if he had any change to spare. It would be hard for a kid to say he didn't have any, with a quarter in his hand, and hard to say he needed it more than we did, since he was about to drop it into a slot for a peek at what he could see anyway, using his eyes. The Mole's job was to look hungry when I asked for the quarter. I thought it was a good scheme that shouldn't have bothered the merchants much, since the only one who was losing any business was the telescope. But the kids didn't want our telescope. They kept lining up at another one, even when the line was longer, and when we finally moved over to the one they preferred, they started lining up for peeks through our old telescope. You see what I mean when I say it's harder than you'd think.

Annabel Lee managed to steer Tiffany past the stand-up cardboard photographer by directing her attention to the rides in Pacific Park on the south side of the pier. She just had to negotiate the choice of terrors there. Annabel Lee was all for the Sea Serpent, which rocked a bunch of kids through the air in relative safety. Or she was willing to go for the bumper cars, which allowed you to smash into other kids, but the size of the cars and their rink prevented anybody over four foot tall from entering. That was enough of a reason for Tiffany to refuse. She swore her little heart would burst if she didn't ride the coaster, which rattled on a track in midair, ducked in and out of high-voltage machinery, and threatened to leap its track for the deep end of the ocean. Annabel Lee kept trying to imagine how to tell Nicole that Tiffany had been snatched by an octopus, in her care. They compromised on the Ferris wheel, though Annabel Lee insisted on going along for the ride, without mentioning her fear of heights.

The ride is set up so that you sit on an unsteady bench with sides and a back, and a bar comes down across your lap. The operator cranks a lever, and your bench lurches up, swinging into the wind until it stops short, ten feet later. You hang there, rocking, while somebody else climbs on, and then it starts to rise again, moving backwards around the face of the wheel. At three o'clock, your bench starts to pitch as if it were trying to toss you out over the crossbar. In front, you see nothing but gray water, the whole Pacific Ocean, which is also rocking enough before your eyes to make you sick to your stomach, if you weren't sick already. You hit two o'clock, one, and midnight, when you know you're going to die. You hope you hit the ocean and make it quick and clean, instead of the pier, where you're going to make a mess. Then it starts spinning faster. You come down into the belly of the ride and out the other side, facing the ocean again, around and around

forever. As long as it's fast and the music plays, it's fun. But suddenly it stops. They have to unload each car one by one, and you have to face the pitching ocean all over. You swear you'll never do this again. But when Annabel Lee looked over to make sure Tiffany had learned her lesson, Tiff was standing up, rocking the car, pounding on the crossbar and screaming as loud as her little lungs would let her. Annabel Lee couldn't make out what Tiff was trying to say, until she cupped one hand to her ear and leaned close enough to hear, "Let's do it again!"

By the time they got back to me and the Mole, we had spanged three quarters between us. Considering I had put a quarter into Madame Blavatsky, our total take for the morning was fifty cents, which was pitiful, considering we had spent a good hour trying to look hungry near the telescope. Tiffany ran up to us and wanted to try the thing, and what did the Mole do but drop a quarter into the slot and lift her up to the viewer? Leaving us one thin coin, twenty-five cents, for our effort. Annabel Lee didn't want to let on that she was disappointed, and she called it "a slow morning," but the truth was the crowd was picking up by then.

When her time was up and the telescope shut off, Tiffany asked me for a quarter to take another look. I told her I didn't have one. The Mole shook his head, and Annabel Lee didn't say a word. So Tiffany walked across the boards to the south side of the pier, where a handsome Latino couple were strolling the boardwalk. He had white teeth and a white sweater, with a gold post in his ear; she was in a skirt and top that overlapped in a knit, like a dress in two pieces.

Tiffany looked at her, then at him, and said in a tiny voice, "Excuse me. Could you give me twenty-five cents, please? I need to call my mom."

The girl said, "Where is she?"

Tiffany said, "Home by now, I think."

"She left you here on your own?"

Tiffany shrugged. "My dad was supposed to be waiting for me. They don't like to be together, so she drops me and drives off."

"And he wasn't waiting, like he promised?" asked the boy, in disgust.

"She must have gotten the arrangements wrong. My mom," said Tiffany quietly, making her voice disappear, like she was holding something back.

The girl looked at her boyfriend.

"You're gonna need more than a quarter to make a call," he said, fishing in his pocket for a quarter and a dime. "Here," he added, without her even asking, "why don't you take this, too? Just in case you need it, 'til she gets here?" Holding out a dollar.

"No thank you," said Tiffany.

"Take it," said the girl.

Tiffany looked up at the boy. His girlfriend looked at him too. He rolled the bill and slipped it between Tiffany's thumb and her palm. "Just in case she's not home and you need to call again later."

"Thank you," said Tiff, squeaking.

"Do you want us to sit with you until she comes?" the girl asked.

Tiffany shook her head. "She'll get mad. If she sees me talking to strangers."

The boy nodded. He approved of that. You can't be too careful. "Go make your call," he said. "Then go to the Boathouse and ask if you can wait there. You see cops hanging around there all the time."

She promised she would do that, and said thank you one more time, and gave him a little curtsy as a bonus. When they walked on, his shoulders were squarer than before, and the girl hung on his elbow more securely. All for a dollar and thirty-five cents. If you ask me, he got a bargain.

Tiffany went into a store as if she was going to make a call, and came out five minutes later with a paper bag of freshly fried potato chips. And she still had the dollar bill rolled in her fist. I knew those cost more than thirty-five cents, and she also had a quarter for another peek through the telescope. She must have done some fast talking in the store, too, which couldn't have been easy, since they see a lot of homeless folk, the merchants on the pier. She offered us some chips, and we took them.

"We better go," said Annabel Lee, wiping her own mouth and then Tiffany's with her fingertips, "before they head back this way."

Instead, Tiffany said, "You go on ahead." The Mole and I looked at Annabel Lee, who shrugged, *Why not?* So we headed back to the mainland, with Tiffany trailing ten paces behind us.

You know what she did, as we walked back? She stopped another couple, then a second, and a third. She gave each one the same sad story, trying out different squeaks and whispers as she went. By the time she joined us again at the end of the walkway, she had her pitch down to the whimper and pout when she said, "Thank you." And she had two fifty-five in her shoe.

9. The Theatre

Nicole thought about the stores on both sides of the Promenade as she walked from Wilshire Boulevard to Arizona and the movie theatre for her interview. She knew them all: JC Penny and Barnes & Noble, Pottery Barn and Restoration Hardware, the clothing stores and restaurants with tables outdoors. But she thought of them differently now. When she and Tiff and their mother and Arthur went strolling after dinner or before a movie started, they would always check out the windows. Her mother would say how silly this was, and who would ever buy that? Arthur might comment how one of the girls would look nice in an outfit. Tiffany would plead, could they listen to the wind-flutes in the Indian store or leaf through picture books in the bookstore? Their mother might make a face, but Arthur would sigh. *Was there something she wanted to buy?* Nicole wasn't buying anything anymore. She scanned the shop windows for a sign: *Employee wanted*. Would they hire a teenager? And could she get something to eat?

That was what she asked herself as she walked the Promenade in the one dress she had taken for this purpose. It was a velvet number Arthur had picked out for her, yards of purple cloth that buttoned at her throat with a wide lace collar. It made her look like Hester Prynne, or an executioner. What fantasy had boiled through his sick brain when he saw the ghastly thing on a mannequin? How had he convinced their mother to bring it home, insist that Nicky try it on, and refuse to take it back? And what mad impulse guided her own hand when she tossed it into her bag, determined to take what she might need and get the hell out of the house? She knew what it was: she needed something that would win the favor of men, and what model did she have but Arthur? So after all his sly compliments,

when Nicky needed a dress that would *work*, she grabbed the one he chose. But were other men really like Arthur in what they thought looked nice on a teenage girl? She hoped so, long enough to get her a job.

In the glass of the storefronts she saw her own reflection: billows of purple velvet and, floating above the Puritan collar, a round face, too doughy and pasty, she thought, for a girl with her name. *Nicole* should be a narrow-waisted, slim-wristed French waif, a songbird perched lightly on delicate feet -- while Nicky's own clodhoppers tramped down the Promenade, shaking steel shutters on either side of the store windows. She stomped down more heavily after that idea, emphasizing her bulk with every step. She didn't need a purple cloud of velvet or a lace collar; she needed a job, and was ready to do whatever she had to do to get one.

She stopped outside the theatre, looked at her watch, and felt anxious. She was early. She sat down on a black iron bench and put up her foot on another, facing her. From the hem of her Hester Prynne dress a hiking boot stuck out defiantly. At least she had the integrity to wear them, despite what Arthur thought. They made her look like a dyke, he told her mother, who would shake her head and ask Nicky if she would mind taking them off, just when she wore the dress. But she liked the idea they made her look like a dyke. Nicky was interested in girls, whom she wanted as her friends, and might have been interested in boys too, if they showed any interest in her. Not that she blamed them for it. When she thought about boys, in bed at night, who did she dream about? Not the shy boys with sweet dispositions, who were kind to animals. She dreamed about the good-looking boys who sneered at everything, including her. Why should they be different than she was?

It would have been nice if Evan Miller, who wasn't even one of the best-looking boys, had smiled back when she smiled at him. But it didn't matter, because it was time to go in.

It was strange, entering a movie theatre without a ticket. She explained to the girl at the door who she was and why she was there, and the girl just let her in without a ticket. She had her name on a pin, Roxanne, and she said, "Good luck with Sal. He's not so bad, once you get the job. Keep telling yourself you can do it." Roxanne gave Nicky an encouraging smile, and all Nicole could think was, *What a bright smile she has! I don't have that bright a smile. I hope Salvatore Montero doesn't expect all of his ushers to smile like Roxanne.*

Everything looked different as she passed through the lobby, thinking she might be the girl taking tickets next time, or selling Red Hots and popcorn behind the candy counter. She would have to learn how to use the soda machine, but it didn't look so hard. She had worked a register at an after-school carnival, selling tickets for all the booths. They probably wouldn't start her behind the candy counter. She would have to earn their respect, standing at a door and smiling. But she wouldn't mind that. *She could do it!* she told herself, as Roxanne had advised her. She could do the job, if only Mr. Montero would give her a chance to show him what she could do.

Nicole found him in an office on the second floor, behind a door she had never noticed in all her trips to the movies. He was a round man, with a small desk in front of him and an old chair between the desk and the door. There were movie posters on the walls of Jane Fonda in spandex and James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause* with a French title. The desk had framed, black-and-white photos of blondes signed to nobody, and a brass nameplate in the shape of a movie clapboard. Montero was talking on the phone when she

knocked, and he signaled for her to come in and sit down in the old chair, while he kept on nodding, as if the person on the other side of the phone could see his head wagging up and down.

"I know what she told you," he said into the receiver, "but you have to listen to me, too. I was there. Were you there? No, she wasn't. I was there." And then he had to listen again, and nod again, and wait for another chance to speak. As he waited, the back of his neck grew red, and he put his palm over it. *Never let them see you sweat*, Nicole thought, and for the first time became aware of her own damp palms. Mr. Montero said, "It wasn't a question of that. Not in the legal sense. I just meant -- "

He had to listen again. He gave her an awkward smile, as if to say it wasn't his fault she had to hear all this. Nicole pointed to her stomach and then to the door, to ask if he wanted her to wait outside. Mr. Montero shook his bald head, which was red on top now too, and poked his finger at her seat, to let her know she had better stay in it. But he nodded vigorously, with the phone still cradled under his chin. Then he looked over at Nicky and scowled as if she might be to blame.

"You're not gonna take the word of that little --" He shook his head and rolled his eyes. By the time he hung up, there were drops of sweat on Mr. Montero's forehead. He wiped his face on a handkerchief and sat forward in his chair. It was worse than his guest chair, with brown stains on the fabric and one wheel different from the other three. He said, "Okay, now, that's settled. What are we here for?"

"A job, please," said Nicole, and her whisper surprised her.

"Speak up. Can't have you mumbling to the customers. Your name?"

"Nicole LoBianco. I filled out an application two weeks ago. We spoke about it on Thursday."

"I have it right here," he said, pulling it from a pile of papers that made Nicky's heart sink. He scanned it quickly, turned the stapled page, and glanced back at the cover. "You're what? Seventeen?"

"Sixteen," she said quickly, and then wondered if she should have corrected him. How many of those other applicants were eighteen or older?

"Ever work in a theatre before?"

"Not professionally."

He looked up.

"I mean, I worked in the auditorium at school, when we had assemblies. And once, when the PTA did a fundraiser, they needed volunteers to take tickets at the door and help the moms to their seats. I did that."

"Took tickets? Or ushered them down the aisle?"

"Actually, I cleaned up afterwards."

"That's good," he said. "That's the hardest part of the job, and the part we need done the best. Did you ever sit in a movie seat and feel the floor sticking to the soles of your shoes? It can ruin the whole experience. And the last thing it makes you feel like doing is going to the concession stand and ordering a soda. Which is the first thing we'd like them to do once they've found their seats. If they haven't on the way to their seats. Which we like even better."

Nicole nodded. This was good. He was teaching her the movie business.

"Yes, sir. I can swing a broom."

He liked that, she could tell. It must have been the word *swing*.

"All right, now. What days can you work?"

"Any day," said Nicky.

"Saturdays and Sundays included?"

"All of them," she repeated.

"Every single day? Through the whole summer?"

Nicole wasn't thinking about school in the fall. She meant all of them, every day, forever. She had to make enough money to rent a place for Tiff and herself, enough to let them eat. She wasn't worried about clothes or books or music, or transportation, or gas and electric, or telephone. She was willing to work any hours he would give her, all days and all nights. But she couldn't say that. She understood that Mr. Montero had an idea about who she was, and that her chances of getting hired were better if he thought he was right about her. She said, "I'll work whenever you need me," which, by his expression, turned out to be the best answer she could have invented.

"Ah," he said, jotting it down on her application. "Well, that's the ideal, isn't it? You understand we pay minimum wage?"

She nodded, though she didn't know what that was. Was he asking her minimum? She wouldn't know what to say except, "Make me an offer." Then a better idea occurred to her. She could say, "I'll take whatever you pay Roxanne," who sounded happy and probably earned as much as Mr. Montero would pay -- the maximum minimum. Nicole knew that wouldn't be a lot of money, but he called it a *wage*, so it had to be more than she had ever earned before. But he seemed to think she understood the terms already. So she said, "That will be fine."

He nodded, patting his neck with his handkerchief, although his forehead and jowls were dry now. She suddenly thought that interviews like this might be his favorite part of his job, and wondered whose word they took over his. Who was "that little --" whatever she was? Roxanne? Was that why she smiled so brightly? But Nicole couldn't afford to think those thoughts, which were interrupted anyway when Mr. Montero said, "Is this the best number to reach you?"

Peering at her form.

"What number is that?" she asked carefully.

He read it aloud off the form, and she shook her head.

"Don't use that one. Use, uh --" She paused, thinking. "I can't quite remember it. And I don't want to get it wrong. Do you mind if I call you, instead?"

Mr. Montero looked at her steadily. "You can't remember your phone number?"

"It's new. It's changed from the old one."

"But the address is the same?"

She wasn't sure what to say about that. "Uh huh."

Something changed in his eyes. "We're gonna have to call you at home," he said, "to let you know your hours, every week. If your folks don't approve of your working here, we can't use you at all."

"They signed," she said, pointing at her form on the desk.

He glanced at the squiggle on the bottom of her application, but he kept nodding. "And if I ask them about this signature, what are they gonna tell me?"

"Please," she said, "don't ask them."

He folded her application and slid it across the desk. "I'd like to hire you, Miss.

I really would. You're one of the few kids who come in here who seem to understand what it means to want a job, and what it takes to keep one. I wish my daughter Julie were as level-headed. But at your age, I need to know that your folks are genuinely behind you. Because if they're not, I'm gonna count on you for a shift some Saturday afternoon, and you're not gonna show up."

"I will."

"You won't. Believe me. I'm sorry to have to say it, but I've been around this block before. And if one more lawsuit crosses the desk of that bitch on the other end of the phone, it'll cost me my job, too. I think you understand what that means, so I think you'll understand when I tell you that I can't hire you without calling home. *I can't do it.* Now - - can I make that call?"

Nicole shook her head. A tear slipped from the corner of her eye, and she wiped it away with her palm.

He set the receiver down in its cradle. "I am sorry."

She stood up. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," he said, shaking her hand. "I mean that. If you're ever ready to let me make that call --"

"I will," she said hoarsely, crying now silently and wiping her face on her sleeve, where it left a dark stain on the purple velvet. Her hand was still in his, and her fingers came apart stiffly when she finally let go. "Thank you, Mr., Uh ..." *What was his name?* For a second she couldn't remember and felt like running away, but stopped her legs from shaking. *Montero!* But it was too late to say it. She was trying to exit with dignity and

should have shut up, instead of making it worse. All she had to do was walk out the door.
But she couldn't risk leaving it that way.

"You won't call them, will you? After I'm gone?"

The top of his head grew red but he told her, "I promise."

"Thank you," she said. And meant it.

10. Drago

Johnny spent Saturday out in the Marina del Rey, which is a kind of housing project built by the City of Los Angeles for middle-class single people, with boat docks and restaurants and plenty of watering holes. There are private homes, tall and narrow, like shoeboxes on end, along a strip of land between the marina and the beach. Some have elevators in them. But most people in the Marina live in condos or apartments and most of those have only one or two bedrooms. Married men, separated from their wives, move in to enjoy the imagined thrill of bachelorhood a second time around. Divorcees move in to find those hapless men when the loneliness of single life settles in again. There, in a condo overlooking a forest of blue hulls, rope rigging, and white spars, lived Johnny's Uncle Francis and his Doberman, Drago.

There were two rooms in the condo: Uncle Francis's bedroom, his inner sanctum; and an outer space that was really two or three regular rooms crunched together. The area around the door he called *the living room* because it had a couch and a chair. To the right as you entered were a pair of roomettes: the *dinette*, which was a table and four chairs, and on the other side of a counter, the *kitchenette*, just wide enough for a person to stand and open the fridge or the dishwasher, but not both at once. They sold it as a lifestyle, implying that walking past boats every day somehow made you a sailor. The air tasted of salt, corroding every bit of exposed wood in a matter of hours. Outside, you heard the flap of sails and cries of seagulls dropping white guano from soaring heights. Inside, the condo afforded what could only be called a *cramped lifestyle*.

The place was decorated in a style they used to call *Danish Modern* but Francis called *Norwegian Wood*, as if he were in England. The couch was a slab of foam covered in blue duck cloth, with a band of blonde wood across the front, and matching armrests. The ash-wood arms made it impossible for Johnny to sleep once he reached a certain size. There was an imitation sling chair you fell into and couldn't crawl out of whatever you did. The coffee table was a sheet of glass with a twist of chrome for a base, sitting on a yellow rug with a brown scribble on it. There was another tube of chrome for a standing lamp, and a chrome étagère that held stereo components Johnny was never allowed to touch. The room's best feature was a floor-to-ceiling window on the wall next to the front door, that looked out over the boat docks. Unfortunately, the vertical blinds never covered the window completely, so Johnny felt exposed to the neighborhood every night, when he went to bed in his underwear. The television set, like everything else Francis cared about, was secured in his bedroom, where it babbled all night, because it helped the Doberman fall back to sleep after he woke up whimpering from a nightmare.

Drago was Uncle Francis's first and only love. When he brought a girl home, if she didn't make a big fuss over Drago, she wasn't likely to see the place ever again. He would stop on his way home from the animation studio and pick up a steak for the dog, which Francis himself wouldn't eat, as a vegetarian. He looked like a vegetable himself, an asparagus spear, with his long, skinny frame and close-cropped hair that left a space on his crown like a beanie. His skin was yellowish, almost green, even though he spread himself out on a towel on the roof of his condo in a tiny black Speedo, soaking up rays Sunday mornings. He had a red Corvette Stingray in the garage below his condo, and he would pile the dog into it and drive to a park on Sunday afternoons, after sun bathing. His favorite

place was a dirt-run near Memorial Park in Santa Monica, where the dog could go off the leash and Francis could watch through the fence as women played tennis in short white dresses. The Doberman ran around, snapping at smaller dogs and crapping wherever he felt like it, testing everyone's patience. You would see people calling their dogs and leaving the park whenever he appeared.

Drago was a mean-spirited animal that would chase the birds people call sparrows but are really English bullfinches; and if he ever caught one, he would eat it. He had a big bark and didn't mind using it to scare a poodle or terrier, the kind you see shaking in the crook of somebody's elbow, going *Yip-yip!* If you weren't afraid of dogs, he would make you afraid of him; and if you *were* afraid of dogs, he would try to bite you. Drago hated to be indoors, and Uncle Francis kept him cooped up inside for sixteen hours at a time. He could go into the bathroom and drink from the toilet bowl, or he could lie down in front of the couch, or he could lie down alongside the bed, and those were his choices hour after hour. No wonder whenever he saw a human being he tried to let them know how he felt about it. What he felt most of the time was a howling fury, as if someone had been standing on his tail for a couple of years. Drago wanted to know who he could hold responsible. And if he didn't know, he was ready to blame any human who happened to be around and didn't feed him.

Enter Johnny D, eight years old.

Johnny never liked Drago, and Drago never liked Johnny, from the day he moved in with his uncle, after the accident. He had been sitting behind his father's seat with a plastic brontosaurus on the hump in the middle of the floor, when the brakes squealed and thirty-seven bars of corrugated iron came crashing through the Chevy's front windshield.

That's when he moved in with Uncle Francis and Drago. The Doberman had a black face with a brown oval over each glittering eye, like a burglar with his mask up, who has to kill you once you've seen his face. He had blood-red gums and lots of jagged teeth that he didn't mind baring when he growled. The dog was heavier than Johnny, back then, and knew how to use his weight. Johnny was always afraid of him, but Francis never did anything to ease his nephew's fear. When he came in at night, he would walk right past Johnny to rub the pooch's head. When they ate together at the table in the dinette, the dog sat up with his paws on his master's lap, snapping bites of chicken sticks off Johnny's plate. Every time he snatched one, Francis laughed and told Johnny he'd better keep a sharper eye out. When there wasn't room in the bedroom for the three of them any more, Johnny was sent to the couch in the living room, while Drago continued to sleep nights curled up in front of the heater. Johnny tried to get even, once, by burying the arm of a plastic doll in the dog's food bowl, but when Francis found Drago gnawing at it, he went after Johnny with a tennis racket. Johnny had to clean up the mess whenever Drago took a dump on the rug, which he did more and more often, and not by accident. Johnny's other chores included cleaning out the refrigerator and organizing the closet, after Francis turned it inside out, hunting for his ski gloves and goggles. Whenever Johnny stopped by, he made a point of tossing odds and ends out of the closet onto the floor of the condo, and kicking something hard underneath the couch, especially when Drago was dozing on the scatter rug in front of it.

Stopping by might not be the best words to describe his visits. Johnny would break into his uncle's condo from time to time, going through the drawers in his bedroom dresser for any loose cash he could find. He was supposed to be getting a check every month from

the insurance company, in payment for his mom and dad. But Francis said he wouldn't get a penny unless he came back to live in the condo. That was pure bullshit, Johnny believed. Francis didn't want him there. He just wanted the money. So Johnny figured he had a right to collect what he could, the only way he knew how to collect it.

Francis never gave Johnny his own key to the condo, because he said Johnny might lose it. He would hide a key instead, in the most obvious places: over the doorway, under the mat, buried in the soil of the planter out front, where any passing thief would think to look. Except on the days he *forgot* to hide the key, when Johnny had to wait out front, while everybody passing understood from the sight that his uncle didn't trust him, and didn't want him there. One day he decided to make himself a copy on the sly. When Francis came home and demanded the key, Johnny gave it back to him. He never used his own copy if he could help it. Whenever he had to, when Francis forgot to leave a key outside - - it made no difference anyway, since it never occurred to his uncle to wonder how Johnny had gotten inside.

Johnny made a practice of jimmying a window, or breaking a pane of glass in the condo's back door, so Francis could figure out how he had broken in. That way, there was no reason for Francis to change the locks, so Johnny could get in the next time.

The dog was a bigger obstacle, but Johnny had solved that by taking a leaf out of a book Annabel Lee had read him. Cupid's girlfriend, Psyche, brought a cake for Cerebus, the Hound at the Gate of Hell, when she had to get past him, and the Roman hero Aeneas had followed her lead. Johnny followed the both of them, and buried a couple of Prozac in a bran muffin when he broke into Francis's condo. The dog ate the muffin with the Prozac inside and curled up in a ball on the rug. Johnny did the same thing the next time

with a blueberry muffin, and the Doberman went for it too. That left him enough time to go through Francis's drawers and look around the condo to see what odd jobs needed doing. Johnny discovered that his uncle had left his Stingray parked in the garage downstairs, and he arranged a little surprise for Francis on his return: he urinated on the driver's seat and left a blue plastic squeeze-toy with its head chewed off on the passenger seat right alongside the stain. Francis always called the damned toy Squeaker, as if the Doberman could understand him when he asked, *Where's Squeaker? Where is he, boy?* As if it was the most important question on earth. The only problem was Johnny couldn't remember if he had closed the passenger door behind him.

Now Johnny was looking forward to slipping Drago a Mickey in an oatmeal raisin muffin. He loved to watch when the dog finally stopped barking and scarfed down the muffin. His eyes went watery and his snout drooped; his legs started twitching under him until he knelt down, toppled sideways, rolled over on his back and snored. But a strange thing happened this time.

Johnny came to the front door as usual and listened while he turned the key, but didn't hear Drago at all. No barking or howling or scratching at the door. Johnny thought the dog must be asleep or at the park. When he opened the door, he saw the Doberman sitting there, waiting for him, with a simpering expression on his snout. Johnny got ready for Drago to attack, but the beast just whimpered and rubbed his head against Johnny's empty hand. Johnny had seen him do that with Uncle Francis, the big mutt playing up to his master's vanity. Did he really think that dumb shit would work on him? He tossed the dog the oatmeal raisin muffin and turned his back.

Johnny could hear Drago slobbering over it, clacking teeth and smacking his lips. In another minute he would gobble up the Prozac, and Johnny would have some peace, to rifle through his uncle's drawers and take what he could find. He didn't like to go in the bedroom while the dog was still awake. Old jealousies die hard, even for canines, and he saw no reason to stir doggie memories and start that fight again.

He always made a point of going through the mail on the floor in front of the slot, in case his check happened to be in the mail. It wasn't, as usual. There were bills made out to Francis Dobush or Frank or F. Dobush, and one to Franklin D. Bush. *Dobush* was Johnny's actual name. He had started calling himself *Johnny Do* for short, and then used *Johnny Dough* for a while, which he thought sounded like a punk rocker. When he hit the stroll, he started spelling it *Johnny Doe*, since that was the name they give corpses in the morgue when they don't have anything else to use for them. Johnny said they might as well get it right in his case. It was a little joke. That other meaning, like a-doe-in-the-headlights, never even occurred to him.

A wet nose in his palm got his attention, and Johnny found Drago nuzzling his hand. Shouldn't the dog be curling up for his sudden afternoon snooze? Johnny turned and saw on the floor behind him the tiny pieces of Prozac he had stuck into the muffin. What, was the dog off drugs now too? He had eaten the cake and cranberries and left the Prozac behind. But he wasn't barking at Johnny either, and he wasn't trying to chomp any flesh out of his calves. Instead he was poking his the palm with a wet snout, trying to get him to do something. What was it? He looked at the dumb beast, who kept right on nuzzling him and started to whine. "Why don't you tell me what you want?" Johnny said out loud. The Doberman slipped his neck under Johnny's hand, who suddenly realized he

had seen this act before, when Francis read the paper in his boxer shorts at the dinette table without cooing at the dog. He wanted to be petted.

“By me?” asked Johnny.

He couldn't believe it. How long had Francis been gone, exactly? Was he out of town? Had the dog been starved for affection for two or three weeks? There was food in his bowl under the counter between the dinette table and the sink, and the food was that wet stuff, like goulash, instead of the dry kernels Francis usually left in the bowl when he planned to be gone overnight. So what was Drago doing now, with Johnny's hand, when he slid the nape of his neck underneath it?

The dog turned his head, and licked his lips, and Johnny understood. It was the muffins -- the bran muffin, and the blueberry, and the cranberry that Johnny had fed him laced with Prozac to put him to sleep while he ransacked the condo. Johnny had fed the dog often enough with fresh baked cake to win his canine forgiveness for whatever had come between them. He had entered the firmament inhabited by Francis, who could kick the beast if he felt like it and Drago would understand that a little thing like the toe of a boot didn't amount to a hill of beans where his supper dish was concerned.

The dog had changed his mind about Johnny and decided to love him. Johnny's own feelings, however, were not to be swayed so easily. The Doberman hadn't fed him. He was prepared to kick the beast down the steep flight of stairs to the garage -- until the dog looked up with moist brown eyes, and Johnny felt an unfamiliar pain in the region below his solar plexus. Drago was still an ugly thing with brown ovals over black fur and a gooey, twitching snout. But the way he kept looking at Johnny and the soft noise from

the back of his throat made it difficult somehow for Johnny to treat him as roughly as he would have liked. “I don’t have any more muffins,” he said.

The dog stretched out on his front paws but kept whining softly.

“All right, already! I’ll see.”

Johnny went over to his uncle’s refrigerator to see what was inside. Not much, as usual, but there was a bowl of macaroni and cheese that Johnny took out of the fridge. He tried some cold. The sauce had congealed and the orange “cheddar” dye stuck to his fingers where he touched it. He held a clump of macaroni in his open hand and let Drago lick it off with his dry, sandpaper tongue. It tickled. Johnny ate a few more macaronis and let the dog eat some more, then dumped the remains into his bowl, on top of the dry kernels of whatever they put into dog food. Drago trotted over, sniffed at the pile, and resumed scarfing it down. His short, stumpy tail was going back and forth like a hot dog pumped on steroids, or a card in a bicycle wheel.

Johnny went into the bedroom, found thirty dollars on Francis’s nightstand, and a watch in the top drawer of his dresser. The watch looked familiar. He wasn’t sure if he had seen it on his uncle’s wrist, or someplace else before that. On his father’s wrist or his grandfather’s? He couldn’t remember. He put it back but left the drawer a crack ajar, so Francis could tell he had opened it.

On his way out, Johnny found Drago waiting at the door. The dog tried to nuzzle him with a snout still orange from macaroni. Despite his worst intentions, Johnny gave him a pat on his head. He sat up, panting, and seemed even fonder of Johnny than before. It felt strange, having a relative who looked forward to seeing him again.

11. The Raid

When Johnny reached the Crib, we were all home, waiting for him. He had a plastic bag from Ralphs in his arms, but we were ahead of him, chowing down on Beefaroni and Chef Boyardee Ravioli. "You got the job?" he asked Nicky in surprise, without thinking about it first. Then he noticed the gray cloud over her, and didn't need to hear the answer.

"This the best number to call you?" said Annabel Lee in a pinched, nasal twang. She wasn't imitating Mr. Montiero, since she had never met him, but another lady who had given her the same runaround. No home equaled no phone equaled no home number equaled no job.

"We got to get a cell phone," Johnny declared.

"Where can we send the charges?" Annabel Lee replied, in the same annoying voice. It made me glad I hadn't wasted any time looking for a job myself.

"All right," said Johnny. "A pay phone, then, by the bathrooms or some place. So where did you get the grub?"

He asked Nicky, but it was the Mole who answered, by breaking out in a laugh. "You should'a seen her, scarfing up change like she was collecting for the minister. I never saw anyone better. She batted her eyelashes, and they started throwing quarters -- even cash money -- like it was toilet paper."

He turned to Annabel Lee. "You spanged?"

"Not me," she said. *"Her."*

We all turned to Tiffany, who was kneeling alongside the cot, playing with a new Barbie doll. She didn't look up but said matter-of-factly, "It wasn't so hard. You just have to ask, that's all. Like you really, really need it."

Johnny squatted next to her. "That's all there is to it?"

"Uh huh."

"She may be onto something," he confided in Annabel Lee.

"I took her to the pier," she told him.

"But she did so well," I said, "when me and the Mole could hardly raise a dime, that we decided to give her a shot at the food court in the inside mall. There were people waiting on line for lunch, and she just stood next to them, and watched closely as they took their slices of pizza and Muscle Beach Burgers and Hot Dogs on a Stick. First they kind of felt her behind them, watching. Then they offered her food. She just shrugged, and waggled back and forth, and looked at her shoes, and swallowed, and they starting to offer her the change they were getting over the counter from their meals. Quarters and dimes, mostly, but one guy gave her the rest of a ten dollar bill. She said *Thank you* and ran back to Annabel Lee, and they didn't seem to mind at all that she was there with us. They might even have been glad of it, since they didn't have to worry about her any more.

It was like Christmas! We bought some lunch, and stopped in at Puzzle Zoo for a doll, and then went to Vons for dinner."

The Mole raised his can of Beefaroni in salute. "Tomorrow we're going to the Promenade," he said, though his mouth was still full from chewing.

"Maybe," said Nicole.

We all looked over. It was a difficult position, being the older sister who had failed to land a job, while her kid sister had done so well financially. We all understood. But we were talking about eating. There are times for sibling rivalry and other times when you can't afford to indulge.

"You mean like maybe *not*?" asked Johnny.

Nicky had been thinking about this, you could tell, and what she planned to say. She took a deep breath and pronounced each word separately and distinctly, as if she were preparing to defend them one by one. "I don't believe it would be good for Tiffany to ask people for money for nothing."

"You don't think it would be *good* for her?" asked Johnny.

"It's not for nothing," said Annabel Lee. "It's for food."

"I'm aware of that," said Nicole.

Johnny leaned in closer. "Would it be *good* for her to starve?"

"No," said Nicky, without moving away.

The Mole thought he saw the mix-up. "Nobody's gonna give her any money unless she asks for it. Take it from me."

"I know that. I know we need it. And I know that Tiff and I can't keep eating off you people. We've got to contribute, both of us, and she may be better at it than I am. But we could give them something in exchange, couldn't we?"

"Like green stamps?" asked Johnny.

"We could give them receipts, for their taxes," said Annabel Lee, trying to sound supportive. "Unless you've got a better idea?"

"As a matter of fact," said Nicole. "But I'll need your help again."

* * *

A. Maxwell Richter, senior partner at Caldicott, Hyde, and Richter, lived with his wife Joanne in a secured community off Sunset between the 405 and Barrington Place. Their home was spacious but discreetly tucked away among magnolias, whose flower petals and thick, green boughs concealed the scale of its vanity. On a street map of Los Angeles their address appeared on a broken dotted line, as if the cartographer couldn't figure out which winding lanes climbed what hills behind the big gates, impregnable but rarely perceptible to the drivers whizzing past on Sunset Boulevard. From their back porch the Richters could gaze north through the treetops to the walls of the Getty Center, perched over a pass through the Santa Monica Mountains. If need be, the tramline of Richard Meyer's monument to an oilman could be severed and the post-medieval fortress defended against ravaging hordes from the city below. In such an event, the Richters believed that they and their affluent neighbors would be welcomed as refugees behind its travertine marble walls.

Until then, afternoons passed pleasantly to the *clip-clip* of garden shears and the gentle *buzz* of gas-powered engines, as anything wild or unruly was trimmed back to restore immaculate order and geometric clarity. The Richters hired Mexican gardeners who spoke almost no English, since they couldn't repeat what they barely understood. The simplest change of schedule, from a Monday to a Tuesday, became a challenge to communicate, but Arthur and Joanne rose to the occasion when necessary in order to ensure the personal

privacy that counted for so much as a sign of professional success. Perhaps they had other reasons, as well.

On this particular Monday, Manuel Gutierrez and his two assistants were entirely absorbed in the difficulties of pruning back an overgrown magnolia tree. To do this, they used poles, strung with ropes that were fastened to clippers at one end, so that a man on the ground or a ladder could reach the branches dappled with sunlight at twice his height. You set the dead or dying limb in the scissors-mouth of the clipper, yanked on the rope, and the branch would fall until it caught on a lower limb or crashed down around you on the lawn. It required judgment of how much to cut, where, and a certain amount of risk to life from limb. For those reasons all three members of Gutierrez's crew were intent on the job, so that none of them was out front, tending the flowerbeds, when Annabel Lee strolled up the flagstone walk and pressed the illuminated doorbell.

She carried her clipboard. It read *Santa Monica College*, but she kept that side pressed against the blue sweater she wore over her flower-print dress. This was Annabel Lee's idea of dressing professionally. She had tried a brush but found it hard going and smoothed back her hair with water and both hands, bringing it together at the nape of her neck with a blue rubber band. She had practiced her opening line in her head over and over. *A natural*, Boo called her, and she was always convincing: when she told them the cherry-flavored condoms made it just like sucking a big red lollipop, they went hard as rock candy and settled back with a sigh. If those performances weren't exactly on a stage or a screen, neither would this one be. She made herself breathe, and collected herself, waiting for the wooden door to open. If this wasn't going to work, it wouldn't be because Annabel Lee hadn't given it her best. She listened but heard only the clips and shouts of

gardeners in the backyard, and a bumblebee buzzing its way down the rows of yellow daffodils in the flowerbeds.

For a moment she thought of standing outside another doorway in Hollywood, where the hall smelled like cat-piss and the only light came from a window at the end of the hallway. When you wanted to hear if anyone was moving around inside, you had to train your ear to ignore the noises of a baby crying on one side and a woman hollering on the other. Then you might hear another voice, softer and sweeter, growl back, *Who is it? Who's there?* through the door in front of you, while a shadow darkens the peephole from the other side. In the moment it takes you to draw your breath, she conjures up police, pimps, or passing trade -- until you whisper, "It's me, Mom. Open up." But even here in the sunshine you had to wait an intolerable time.

Somewhere in the depths of the house, bells must have chimed or a sequence of tones must have hummed a programmed melody that announced her presence at the door. It took a few minutes for the music to register and for someone working in the bathroom or kitchen to make her soft-soled way to the entrance. Annabel Lee was tempted to push the white button again. Before she decided, the beveled edges and hand-worked panels of the door swung wide and a small woman in a blue apron was standing in the doorway. Her name was Angela, but Annabel Lee remembered she wasn't supposed to know that.

"Jess?"

Annabel Lee forgot her line. But she remembered her motivation and the goal of the scene, and in her best Avon voice said, "Is the woman of the house at home?"

"Who's asking?" inquired the maid.

Annabel Lee would have preferred *Who shall I say is calling?* but she was in no position to give instructions. She concentrated on her objective, on the second shelf to the right behind the second door to the left at the top of the stairs, and replied, "I'm from BankAmerica. We, uh, hold the mortgage on this place? Some questions have come up," and now she remembered a word, "concerning the *escrow*."

Annabel Lee didn't know what an *escrow* was, although she knew it had to close when you bought a house. She felt pretty sure the maid wouldn't know more than that, either. But Angela scrutinized her closely, unconvinced by something in her appearance or pronunciation. Maybe ladies who work for banks don't wear print dresses, or maybe the flowers on them are smaller. For a second, Annabel Lee expected her to say, *Are you kidding me? Get out'a here*. But it wasn't her home, and she couldn't take a chance when it came to the Richters's mortgage. She smoothed the apron against her thighs and said, "What kind'a questions?"

Annabel Lee pretended she was trying not to fart. She thought that sense-memory would suggest it was too indiscreet to answer. She squeezed together the muscles of her behind and said, "Irregularities."

What could Angela say to that? Asking anything more would be prying. If the Richters had financial trouble, the more she knew about it, the less they would like it. And she had been with them long enough to know that a choice between their vanity and her discretion was no choice at all. She'd be looking for another job. She said, "Jou'll have to speak to her about that."

"Uh huh." Annabel Lee waited.

Angela would have liked to close the front door. "She stays at the gym 'til eleven. You can come back around then."

That was precisely why they had planned their attack for this time of the morning. Annabel Lee cleared her throat. "I'm sorry, but we have tried four times now to reach Mrs. Richter, and my instructions are to wait right here until she returns."

Right here meant *right there*, inside the door. Angela had to admit her to the entrance hall or risk alienating the Richter's bank. The maid stood in the doorway, trying to protect her employers but uncertain which way protected them best. She was saved from having to make this decision by a noise behind her, the genteel beep of a telephone inside the house. She said, "Excuse me, please," and retreated. The door would have closed of its own weight, had not Annabel Lee caught its brass knob and held it where the corner of its wooden depth met the doorframe, so that the brass tongue along the edge could not slip into its latch.

She gave the maid a minute to pick up the phone and then cracked the door just enough to hear her conversation. "Jess, this is Angela. Who is this, please?"

A long beat, until --

"Nicole?" And then, in a rush, "Where are you? Are you all right? Is Tiffany with you? Wait, let me call your mother."

Annabel Lee imagined what Nicky would be saying on the other end, speaking quietly and carefully, so that Angela would have to slow herself down and concentrate on what she was hearing. *No, Nicole didn't want to talk to her mother. She would hang up, if Angela called her. Tiff was okay, but life was harder than she thought it would be. She*

just wanted Angela to know that they were all right. She didn't want to get Angela into any trouble, but there was something she could do, if she wanted to help them.

"Honey --" said the maid.

Please don't say No! She was the only one Nicky could trust, and if Tiff and she ever meant anything to her --

Annabel Lee did not wait to hear whether Angela would be willing to help. She knew that she wouldn't, or at least wouldn't do anything that anyone could interpret as helping the two girls make it on the streets, and so stay away. Annabel Lee waited until the maid's voice sounded a little further off. Then she threw open the door and stepped into a glittering entrance hall. There was a mirror on the wall, bigger than life-size, with a golden frame twisted into all kind of shapes. Beneath it stood the tiniest table with a crystal vase full of flowers. The floor was shiny underfoot, huge black and white squares covered by a rug, so you could hardly see the marble except around the edges of its red Persian design. The walls were covered in dark cherry wood, which reflected the syrupy sunlight streaming in through the windows overhead. The foyer was two stories high, with a staircase rising up to the second floor, with a newel and banister topped in clean, white porcelain. For an instant Annabel Lee thought, *How could they leave all this? They'll never make it on the streets*, and then remembered Nicky saying they hadn't been born to it anyway. Their mother Joanne had married Arthur Richter after three difficult years of raising the two girls alone. Nicole had been seven then and Tiffany only four. Their mother had found them a new home and a new father as attentive to her girls as any man could be. He never called them *your children* or kept a watchful distance. Instead, he embraced her daughters as his own -- and often. When Joanne was ill, he would drive the girls to school,

and when Nicole was ill, he would share the job of taking care of her, boiling soup or giving her aspirin, pressing a damp washcloth to her forehead, and taking her temperature, rectally. Nicole never liked that, although Arthur said it gave a more reliable reading than the kind you put in your mouth. That's what fathers were like, her mother told Nicky; bringing it up to Artie would only insult him. He showed a lot of concern whenever she woke up with a cough or a snuffle, and often suggested she spend a day in bed when Joanne would have sent her to school. He began dropping hints that Joanne was putting on weight. Nicole didn't see it, but one birthday he signed her mother up for a gym. That didn't go over so well, but he gave her so much praise for going to her aerobics class, Joanne fell into the habit three times a week. When Nicky got sick, Artie told Joanne to go to class anyway and keep herself healthy. He could stay home for a couple of hours, to keep the kid company. Afterwards, Nicole began to plan her escape. She wanted to be absolutely sure she would never have to come back. But when she saw him fretting over Tiffany's health, Nicole knew that she couldn't wait any longer. She squeezed what would fit into her Brentwood backpack, tripped off to school with Tiffany, but never passed through the gate. When Artie went to pick them up at the end of the day, he was told they had never checked in that morning.

Annabel Lee had heard most of this on the very first evening, when she met Nicky and Tiffany after dinner in a shelter, where she took her break from the Crib. She loved Johnny, really she did, but he could be so annoying, sometimes she had to get away. And it was always dangerous for a lone female to spend a night out on the street. Besides, he wouldn't follow her into a shelter, even if any would take him. They had to make choices too, the shelters did, and they would add an extra bed to accommodate a girl, when they

wouldn't find room for a boy. Annabel Lee had watched Tiffany talking to her doll in the playroom, and struck up a conversation with her sister. She was surprised to learn how thoughtful Nicky was, and how determined. Some time in the middle of the night, while most of the guests were asleep, Nicky told her why they had run away from home, and why they could never go back, ever. Annabel Lee listened, and though she had heard the same story from runaway girls a hundred times before, something stirred inside her and she promised Nicky she would help them survive.

Nicole was smart enough to take what help she could get.

Now Annabel Lee stood in the sunlit entrance hall and wondered what she had gotten herself into. The evidence of money was startling here, and the implication of power that went with it. Somebody would be looking for these girls, with money to buy information, and somebody would find them eventually. There were too many people out on the streets who would kill you for a pair of shoes if you happened to be their size. They would do anything for the money Artie could offer. But now was not the time to dwell on that side. She had a role to play, and Annabel Lee would play it. She heard the maid's voice rise, speaking into the phone. Annabel Lee headed for the staircase winding up to the bedrooms on the second floor. She took the stairs two at a time but slowed as she neared the top. In her head, Nicky's instructions kept looping: *the second shelf to the right behind the second door to the left at the top of the stairs, the second shelf to the right behind the second door to the left --*

Below, she heard Angela cry out, "Don't hang up! Wait!"

Not yet, Nicky. Three minutes more.

Then she was at the top of the stairs and counted one, two doors to the left and flung open the door without knocking and turned to her right. But there were no shelves. Panic rose in her throat like an apple swallowed whole. And then she saw it, sitting on the floor in front of the television set, a gray case with a silver band around it and a black handle, with three boards painted white stacked behind it. The shelves. They had been taken down. As a matter of fact, the whole room was spread out on the floor, the drawers removed and taken apart, the clothes stacked in piles that had fallen over. Someone had searched the room, maybe to see if anything was hidden that might give Nicky's parents a clue as to where she might have gone. Annabel Lee picked up the case by its handle and shook it. Nothing rattled inside, but by its weight she figured she had what she had come for, and took the spiraling steps downstairs two at a time.

At the foot of the stairs, she saw Angela heading her way, her mouth twisted like a winter prune and her eyes hard as stones. She was pissed off, and Annabel Lee couldn't blame her. They had played her, and nobody likes feeling the fool. The fact that it had been Nicole on the other end of the telephone drawing her out of the way could only have made it worse. She held one hand in front of her, holding down her apron, but she was fast in her soft-soled shoes, and reached the space between the stairs and the door before Annabel Lee escaped. She tried to block the path with her square body. Annabel Lee dodged around her, but was jerked back, caught by the sleeve of her sweater. She tugged it free with a fierce pull, right through Angela's fingers, and sprinted for the door. She would have made it through, too, but as she looked back in triumph, Angela screamed at her desperately, "Wait! *Senorita -- por favor!*"

Something in her anguished voice made Annabel Lee turn, with one hand on the knob and the small gray case already out the door.

"One minute, please," Angela said in a softer voice. "Let me give you something, for the little one." Annabel Lee nearly bolted as Angela moved, but she wasn't heading towards the door. She opened a closet near the mirror, reached all the way into the back, and brought out a small pink ski jacket with a white lining. She brushed a smudge of white chalk off the sleeve. "She's always so cold, isn't she? This is getting small for her, but still -- on the streets all night? It's better than nothing."

She walked towards Annabel Lee, stopped two arm-lengths away, and held out the jacket. Annabel Lee regarded it suspiciously for an instant, then snatched it away, and disappeared through the door. When the maid appeared on the front step behind her, she was already several yards ahead, loping down the lawn.

When she rounded the corner, I was waiting for her. We had two plans of escape. Plan A assumed that somebody would be chasing her down the street. In that scenario, Annabel Lee would pass me the gray case and keep running toward the main gate at the eastern end of the drive. I was to crawl behind a certain rosebush and then, once they had passed, take off down the drive in the opposite direction until it exited onto Sunset at its western end. They could catch her and search her at the gate, but she wouldn't have any stolen goods in her possession. The way it turned out, when Annabel Lee reached me, nobody was following her, so we decided to go with Plan B -- we ran off together toward the western end of the drive, where the road curved to a gate that opened automatically, allowing cars to exit into traffic. Beside the auto exit was a narrow pedestrian gate Nicky had pointed out. You couldn't open it from the outside, but if you waited long enough,

sooner or later a maid would come out on an errand to Brentwood Village, up the hill. There were no private security guards to challenge us, on that end. That's how we got in, and that's how we got out. Fifteen minutes later, we ran up Barrington Place ourselves and found Nicole waiting next to the public telephone.

Annabel Lee handed over the pink-and-white ski jacket. "Angela gave this to me for your sister."

"I told you she was nice," said Nicole.

"She was," agreed Annabel Lee, and then nobody said anything else, until the bus pulled up, and we got on, and found three seats in the back. Two seats were side by side and the third was catty-corner, facing into the aisle. That's where I sat, while Nicole sat in front of me and Annabel Lee took a seat between Nicky and the window. We were all gathered around when Nicole set the gray case in her lap, balanced it between her knees, and opened the lid.

I remember the sound of the bus's engine revving up, and the smell of the exhaust coming in a crack in the window. The sunlight was falling through the sliding panes to my left, slanting over Nicole's shoulder. It gleamed on the silver piping of something that lay in pieces, embedded in red velvet. It wasn't until she picked up a piece and blew into one end that I saw how the pieces fit together to make Nicole's flute.

12. Bethany Crawford

If you walk down the Promenade, especially at night, you'll see crowds of people gathered around watching or listening to street performers. Some are pretty humble, a black guy with a guitar and his children standing around him. Some are pretty spiffy, like the pianist in a tux who sings show tunes into a microphone. There are acts who stand still, so still you can hardly believe they're alive, with their faces and hands painted silver, like machines. There are all sorts of acts doing acrobatics, or magic, or dancing, and music. When you stroll down from Broadway to Wilshire after dinner, you'll find them every few hundred feet, neatly spaced as if they fell into place from heaven. But they don't fall into those places. You have to get a permit from the City of Santa Monica, and tell them exactly what you do. They have assigned zones where you can perform and where you can't, like within ten feet of Wilshire Boulevard. You have to stay forty feet from the next street performer, and can't keep a spot forever, but have to move along, rotating every two hours. You see signs on the Promenade, picket signs, rallying support for the poor street performers, as if there weren't other street performers even poorer, waiting for their chance at the limelight.

Nicky's idea, when she didn't get the job in the theatre, was to try her luck as a street performer, playing her silver flute. That way, Tiffany could go around with the gray case, collecting from the people who gathered to listen, but Nicky could keep an eye on her and give them something back for their money. It wasn't such a bad idea, and Annabel Lee got behind it, so that Johnny was forced to agree it was worth a try, at least. He was willing to see how much Nicky and Tiffany could earn that way before telling them they had to find

some other place to stay. When Nicky heard him say it, she had to be grateful, but you could tell by the way she clenched her jaw when she said, *Thank you* how much she hated having to depend on him for a roof.

Her position was awkward. It was her first time on the streets, and she had a kid sister to look after. She didn't know where to find anything, or what to watch out for, and once she knew she wasn't getting a job, she didn't know how they were going to survive. She wasn't used to it, and had to bite her tongue so often, it took me a while to realize that Nicky was really one of the most determined people I ever knew. She could do a lot of things, and what she couldn't do, she was willing to learn. More impressive than that -- she was willing to learn them in public, to try something new where everybody could see her fail, if she needed to, before she succeeded. Myself, I get tongue-tied if an operator calls and asks if I'll accept the charges on a collect call. But Nicky was willing to risk the embarrassment of getting up in front of hundreds of strangers and puffing on her silver flute. If you don't remember, embarrassment to a teenager is like the most dreaded thing imaginable. And Nicky needed a permit to do it.

Getting a permit is, like everything else, impossible for a kid on her own. The permit itself is easy enough: you have to go down to the City Hall licensing department, fill out a form, pay thirty-seven dollars, and tell them you're going to sing or dance but not do any handicrafts. That takes up to three business days. The problem is, if you're underage, you also need a work permit. Most work permits are issued at the high school, for kids from twelve to eighteen years of age who live or go to school in Santa Monica. You go to the Regional Occupational Program Office and fill out a form -- for which you need an address, and a parent's signature, proof of school registration, and a job offer. Over

the summer, you don't have to be in school. But even if you fake the address and parent's signature, you need an employer to verify that he's offered you a job, and how do you get an employer's signature if you're playing flute on the street?

The answer is an entertainer's permit, which you can get from the Department of Industrial Relations, a state agency. They have two offices in the Los Angeles area: one in Van Nuys, in the Valley, and the other downtown, on South Broadway. Transportation to either of those places is a challenge, of course, but it hardly helps when you get there, because you still need a school record signed by your principal.

Or you can lie.

Since they make it impossible for a young performer to fill out the form truthfully and get a permit, Nicole had no choice but to lie all over the place. She was twenty-one, living alone in a hotel off Ocean Boulevard. Annabel Lee gave her a driver's license with the crucial birth date on it. She had four years of experience playing flute on the street. She had been trained in a conservatory in Boston, and was now earning her way through a graduate degree at the USC School of Music. All this was fine with the City. With every lie, they liked her better. But if she had told them the truth, that she and her sister were desperate teenagers on the run, they would never have let her earn the money she needed to get off the streets -- or live on them.

Nicky tried her first street performance on Tuesday afternoon, when the movies offered discount prices for the twilight show. When she showed up on Arizona Avenue, there was already an electric guitarist playing in the zone between the Food Court and Johnny Rocket's, and another between the topiary dinosaurs, so Nicole kept going until she found a spot closer to Santa Monica Boulevard. It was down in front of Starbucks, across

from the Disney story. The Mole and I went with Nicky and Tiff, to cheer her on. We sat on a black bench under a tree while Nicky stood in the middle of the promenade, holding her flute in two hands. Tiffany took her gray case to the people. Nobody sat at the outdoor tables, or stood around waiting in line, but there was traffic, couples strolling by the shop windows, groups of kids jostling one another, and single people hurrying from one place to the next. And it was zoned for music. Even from where we sat, it was scary when she lifted the flute to her lips and started to blow.

She wasn't half bad. She played her strongest piece first, a demanding selection from *The Magic Flute*, which she had practiced and practiced in her private school's woodwind quartet and had memorized, note by note. She gave a virtuoso performance, but when she lowered the flute, breathing heavily, only me and the Mole and Tiffany applauded. Nicole put up her flute, and waited. That was the moment that required the most courage, when nobody paid any attention. Nicky said, "Thank you," to us, politely, and her sister walked around with the gray case, holding it up so people could drop in some change. But no one gave her a dime. I wagged my finger and tossed in a quarter. Tiffany set down the case near Nicole with the single quarter in it and sat down on the curb in front of me and the Mole.

Nicole tried her second number -- a popular ballad from the fourteenth century, she told us before she started. She didn't hold anything back this time, but played with a passion and didn't stop playing that particular number until her face was scarlet from the effort and her fingers were sore from the stops, and her head was shaking back and forth from the rousing finish. Again she received a stunning lack of response from passers-by. The couple at the window of the music store kept looking at the display as if nothing had

happened behind them. When Tiffany brought them the gray case, the girl looked inside as if Tiff were offering her a chocolate, and shook her head when she understood she was being asked for a donation. She tugged on the elbow of the guy still looking at the CD's in the window, and they crossed Santa Monica Boulevard, where a hawker offered them a free bite of pretzel as a sample.

Desperate, Nicole tried a third time, setting her lips to the metal for a rendition of the Randy Newman song, "I Love L.A." Afterwards she told me she selected it because her lips were getting chapped, and it was all she thought she could play. Newman wrote that song not too long after "Short People," and I always heard the same irony in both of them. But nobody else must have thought so, because it was another hit for Randy and the first hit for Nicole. People stopped to listen and when the chorus came up, one guy even sang along. When the song was over, he had such a good time, he put two quarters into the gray case without Tiffany even asking.

That taught us something, all right. She followed it up with, "Born in the U.S.A.," the Springsteen song about an angry veteran, whose lyrics nobody listens to, either. They just sing along the chorus with a fist raised in the air, as if it were a patriotic number like "The Star-Spangled Banner." Nobody can sing the first stanza of that song, either. Okay, a music teacher in a school can, but nobody else. Its sentences wind around so much, you can't tell what the subject is from one line to the next. That's what Nicole played next, and then "God Bless America." An old man came out of the UCLA Extension storefront, marched over, and gave her a dollar before the song even ended. He stood like a rod in front of her with his hand up to his forehead in salute and didn't snap it down until the last note had been blown.

She played for two hours, every hokey number she could think of. They ate it up. By the time she had to rotate, to make way for an electric pianist, she had eleven dollars in silver and six one-dollar bills in her case. The next spot, between topiary dinosaurs, was already occupied, but Nicky didn't mind, since she had played her lips to a frazzle. She would have been in heaven, except for one thing that happened while she was taking apart her flute and packing up the pieces in her gray case.

A girl came up to talk to her, somebody who had listened to the entire last song and might even have caught the flourish at the tail of the one before. The girl was about Nicky's age, dressed in a plaid skirt with a white sweater that had tiny pearls, or beads that looked like pearls, where the buttons should be. Her hair was cut short, brownish red, an interesting color that seemed to change hue with the light as she shifted. It hung down straight and was clipped like a boy's just above her collar, but something in the shape was unmistakably feminine. Nicky could have named the salon, just a short time before. The other girl was skinny but not hungry-looking. She wore nude lipstick and clear nail polish, and said, "Nicole?"

The flautist looked up. "Hello, Bethany."

"I thought that was you."

Nicky concentrated on the snaps of her case. I'll tell you what she was feeling: unwashed and uncombed, as if she suddenly remembered she hadn't had a bath in a week. Her brown hair had lost its bounce, and though it still wound around her ear, it was flat on one side and stuck out on the other. Her clothes were a perfectly nice flannel shirt and denim jeans, but they looked dirtier with Bethany standing beside her, and the knees bagged. Nicky wore no make-up, and even if she didn't used to wear much, it's not the

same when you have none to refuse. The worst part is your fingernails, which collect grime that you cannot completely clean out, even in a shower, and don't look like the fingernails of any person who owns a bathtub and a sink. Nicky looked at her nails and tried to fold them under, but she needed her fingertips to buckle the gray case, so she couldn't hide them in her pockets, as I would have done.

Bethany said, "Are you were doing this over the summer?"

Nicky shrugged. "I'm just giving it a whirl."

"You sounded nice."

"Thanks."

"I mean that. Are you gonna be here any other days?"

"I doubt it. Are you here alone?"

"My folks are still in Yangtse, paying the check. You want to say hello?"

"Can't. Got to run," said Nicky, looking around. She didn't see Tiffany, only me, and wouldn't leave without her. I ambled over to Nicole, planning to tell her that her sister and the Mole had ducked into the candy store as soon as Bethany said, "Nicole?" But the minute I got close enough, Bethany looked at me and her eyes went wide. I saw blue contact lens floating over brown irises. She turned to Nicole as if expecting an explanation where none was humanly possible.

"Just a sec," Nicky told me.

Bethany whispered to Nicole, "Do you know this person?"

"Beth, meet Moses. Moses, Bethany Crawford."

An introduction might have been the last thing Beth was hoping for, but I didn't mind. I said, "Nice to meetcha, Ms. Crawford," and she didn't know what to say back. She

showed lots of little, round teeth when she gave me an uncertain smile, like one of us was crazy and she was really hoping it wasn't her.

"Hi," she croaked, while I shook her pale hand.

"Tiff's looking at candy," I told Nicky. "With the governess. Until the chauffeur brings the car around."

"Shut up, Moses," said Nicole. "You don't have to do this."

"You want me to carry that case for you?"

Nicky grabbed it into her arms before I could wrestle it away. She said, "See you, Beth," and walked away, headed for the candy shop. If I had a cap I would've tipped it, but I didn't, so I gave Bethany a two-fingered salute, like Gary Cooper in *Morocco*. Then I followed after Nicky with a crisp step, while Beth watched us go with her mouth open. When we passed Yang-tse, a couple were coming out and the woman tapped her husband on the arm and looked at Nicky. She didn't see them, or else didn't acknowledge them, and when we found the Mole and Tiffany in the candy shop, she lost no time in bundling her sister out of there, without jelly bellies. Tiffany said they had done so well playing flute outside, but Nicky didn't feel they were doing so well, and didn't know if they could do it ever again. We were on our way home to the Crib before she said anything to me about what had happened.

"We can't risk it," she said, as if I knew what she was thinking. "Beth is a pal -- or at least, she was. I don't think she'll say anything to anybody. But somebody's bound to see us with a big mouth, who will tell someone else. Arthur will hear about it, and he'll come and find us."

I didn't know what to say to that, so I didn't say anything at all. The Mole knew that the mood had changed, and that was enough for him. Tiffany was pissed off because Nicky wouldn't buy her the jelly bellies after she had worked so hard with the gray case on the Promenade. She made a long face, and showed it to Nicole and to me but didn't to the Mole. Children treated him like he was one of them, and they were probably right. The two of them started running, chasing each other, and giggling when he caught her, so that by the time we got back to the Crib, Tiffany had forgotten all about the jelly bellies.

But Nicky couldn't forget about Beth.

When we got back to the Crib, Tiff told everybody the whole story in one breath. Then I told it carefully, with reminders from the Mole. Then Nicky told it herself, giving them the perspective from behind the flute. She gave Johnny ten dollars and kept seven for herself. He said, "That's all you made? Seventeen dollars?"

"In two hours," said Nicky.

"On her first day out," said Annabel Lee. "That's good money. And I'll bet she does better tomorrow."

Afterwards, when we were getting ready for bed, Nicky pulled Annabel Lee aside and they went outside for a smoke. Nicky didn't smoke before, but it's comforting and warming on the streets, and it gives you something to do with your hands. "I don't know if I can go out again tomorrow," Nicky said, flicking her cigarette to get off some ashes that clung to the end. She kept thinking about Bethany and the Crawfords in Yang-tse, and the anxiety made her climb up on the concrete park fence. "We can't go back home. We can't. If he finds us, he'll drag us back. If we have to go back, I'll die. And if I keep performing on the Promenade, sooner or later he's going to find us."

Annabel Lee told her not to worry. She would sleep on it. That was just an expression, I knew, because Annabel Lee would be sleeping on Johnny. They were hot and heavy again, so that you had to take a piss before you went to sleep, because if you woke up in the middle of the night with a full bladder, you had to hold it until things quieted down. You wouldn't want to disturb them right in the middle. That night was no different. Nicky lay awake for hours, listening to the two of them slap and moan, not because she was interested in their giggling but because she couldn't help worrying about her own self and Tiffany.

But, don't you know, by the morning Annabel Lee had the answer.

13. Diamonds and Roses

When I woke up the next morning, Annabel Lee had already left for summer school, and Johnny was gone, and Nicky and Tiff were too. Only the Mole was still hanging around, sitting up on his knees on the cot, staring at the motes of dust suspended in the sunlight. After three long minutes sitting perfectly still, his hand shot out like a cat's trying to snatch a mouse. Only, from the looks of it, he was trying to catch the light.

Without looking over at me, the Mole said, "You know how to juggle?"

"No," I said, thinking, *He wants to juggle dust motes?*

"Then it's my job to teach you," he said, producing three bean bags from behind his knees on the cot. Each bag was made from a white sock stuffed with lima beans and sewn closed. "My assignment this morning from Johnny."

"You know how to juggle?"

He gave me a sidelong glance, as if it was silly of me to ask. Is juggling part of the regular curriculum they teach people who grow up under the earth in subway tunnels? I spent the rest of the morning passing one bundle of sock from my left hand to my right, while I tossed a second one into the air, and dropped a third on the ground. You couldn't say I had a knack for it. I was saved from complete frustration by Annabel Lee, when she returned to the Crib with Nicky and Tiff, all of them carrying plastic bags.

"We had a productive morning," she said, plopping her bags on the table.

Nicky did the same and began searching through the packages. "You want me to start on the fabric?"

"I got the scissors," said Tiffany.

There was something different about Nicky, but I didn't know what it was until I saw her kid sister. Tiffany's hair hadn't been cut exactly, but it was all done in corn rows, like you see on Bo Derrick in the movie *10* -- except that Tiff's was red, of course, and Bo's was blonder than Annabel Lee's, which was blonde on top with brown streaks under and between the blonde ones. Nicky's hair was brown, and once I saw Tiff's, I noticed Nicole had cut hers, too. It was so short, you could see the back of her neck, like a boy's. In front it had a fringe that looked sort of girlish. She said, "Tiffany, stop playing with that. A scissor can hurt you."

"I'll be careful," said Tiff. "Give me something to cut."

Nicky took the scissors away from her anyway and put them down on the table. "When we're ready, I will."

Tiffany crossed her arms. "I'm ready now."

Nicole and Annabel Lee exchanged a glance and sighed. They had worked out their plans and Tiffany wasn't part of them. I knew how she felt.

"We have everything, don't we?"

Nicky started checking again. "I think --"

From their packages they took out two bolts of felt, one red and one green, maybe six yards apiece. They had blue and pink ribbons on cardboard spools, and Annabel Lee took out of her bag some ninety-nine cent packs of Halloween make-up, the kind you use to make yourself a vampire, with white and red and black goo. You find them in drug stores like Rite-Aid or Sav-on in October but they're not so easy to find over the summer. When they had it all out on the table, I asked Nicky, "Is that what you spent your money on? After all that flute-tooting?"

"It's an investment," said Annabel Lee.

The Mole took the scissors and clacked them. "We're having a sewing bee."

"Let me have those," said Nicole.

She took the scissors from the Mole and gave them to Annabel Lee.

"You said I could do the cutting," Tiffany complained.

"Just watch," Nicky told her.

Annabel Lee cleared the table and laid out a square yard of green cloth on it. She folded it neatly in half and cut straight down the fold. She folded it again the short way and cut a semi-circle like a half moon right in the middle of it. Then she started cutting along the edge, going in and out, in and out, like the square top of a castle wall -- *crenulated* she said. She held up the thing, seemed pleased with it and turned to me. "Close your eyes, Moses."

I did, and felt her slip the felt over my head. When I opened them I was wearing a green smock on my shoulders that hung down halfway to my elbows. The bottom edge was fringed with crenulations across the front, both arms, and the back. The Mole had a big grin on his face, but Annabel Lee said, "Perfect. Very handsome. And very fifteenth century." She nodded, as if that was something every buck wanted to be.

"You look like Peter Pan," said the Mole.

"Robin Hood," said Annabel Lee.

Nicky had already begun to work on the next one. She used the red felt and cut it smaller, so that when it was finished it fit Tiffany as well as mine fit me. Annabel Lee squatted down in front of her with some Halloween make-up in her palm. Tiffany closed

her eyes and Annabel Lee started slathering white paint across her forehead and cheeks. As she worked she said more or less to me:

“Nicky made good money yesterday, playing on the Promenade. But she was recognized by a girlfriend, and that scared her. What was going to stop her step-dad from finding her next? She didn’t want to go out again. But she needs the money, and we do too. She had to find a way to play her flute without being recognized on the street. To me that meant a disguise. But how could she go around wearing enough make-up to fool anybody and not get picked up for public weirdness?”

Tiffany’s face was covered in white paint now, and Annabel Lee began drawing red lines, starting on her forehead above each eyebrow, running down over her eyelids, and ending in the middle of each cheek. At the top and bottom of each streak she drew a red ball, bigger on each cheek than the ones above the eyebrows. She paused to assess her handiwork and brushed a bit of red gunk out of Tiffany’s eyelashes.

“I dreamt about it all last night. She could be a Goth, with loads of black eye shadow, or a Kiss freak in whiteface like Gene Simmons. Or maybe she could be a clown. That reminded me of something I read about in class. In the Middle Ages, there used to be these traveling groups called *commedia del’arte* who went from village to village, entertaining people. They were musicians and dancers and clowns and acrobats, who put on shows in the town square. They would pass the hat for donations, which is what they do on the Promenade. Then I thought: Nicky plays music, and I can dance, and we sure have enough clowns.”

Annabel Lee gave me an unexpected smile and turned Tiffany around, who looked like a court jester or the joker in a deck of cards. She made a face of wide-eyed surprise,

with her fingers splayed open and her mouth in the shape of an O. She danced around, rocking from side to side. She stopped, pointed at my face, and laughed silently, slapping her thigh. I brushed off my nose and asked, “What do you call that?”

“Pantomime,” said Nicole.

Annabel Lee took a tambourine out of another plastic bag. She shook it, jangling the bangles around its wooden rim, striking the drumskin center with her palm. I didn’t have to ask where she got it, because in black magic marker on the inside of the skin was written *Ocean Park Community Children’s Center*. Suddenly I felt weird in a Peter Pan cape with crenelations hanging over my shoulders.

“What am I supposed to do while Nicky’s playing the flute, Tiffany’s making fun of the paying customers, and you’re dancing around like a gypsy?”

It was the Mole who answered, tossing me three inches of a white sock with lima beans sewn inside it. “Juggle.”

“I don’t know how to juggle,” I reminded him.

“Then drop things,” he told me. “And pick them up again.”

“You’ll be fine,” said Annabel Lee, patting my elbow. But she hadn’t seen me practicing, had she?

Johnny met us at the Promenade. He had a pink plastic guitar with Scooby-Doo’s picture on the front. Annabel Lee took out a crenelated cape she had cut for him, and while she tried to slip it over his head, he bent over the plastic guitar, strumming its four strings as if he were Eric Clapton playing Layla with the Dominoes. The plastic noise that came out of it didn’t slow him down, and as he leaned forward Annabel Lee smeared some white

on his face. They were all in whiteface. Not me. I had two red diamonds on my cheeks, but the rest was still blackface.

“Let’s go make us some *money*,” Johnny sang with a *twang*.

We started at the southern end, where the inside mall meets the Promenade, and began strolling north. Nicky played her flute and the rest of us tagged along. Annabel Lee rattled her tambourine, and Johnny jumped all over the place, strumming Scooby Doo like a ukulele one minute, and squeezing out the bass notes the next. People turned to look at us, all right, but no one put his hand in his pocket except maybe to feel for a can of mace - - and I couldn't blame him. When we got to the Odeon Theatre, we stopped near the ticket line, where people were already lining up. Nicky started a new rendition of *God Bless America*, and the Mole tossed me a sock to juggle.

I dropped it on the ground.

For some reason, that got people's attention. The Mole and I became the center of a small group of pedestrians who started to gather around us, curious what we were up to. It was ridiculous. I couldn't juggle the bean bags at all, with only one lesson behind me. The Mole did pretty well, keeping three going, but every time he sent one flying my way, it caught me by surprise and I missed it. Usually it caught the back of my hand and fell to the ground, but sometimes I missed it entirely and had to get it back from somebody in the audience, after it hit them. People got real quiet when I dropped them, at first, but when they saw how good the Mole was, they started to think it was all an act and laughed every time I missed one. They even laughed at the other onlookers who got hit by the sock. Johnny started scooting around the inside of the circle, playing his plastic guitar to some couple or a single guy, strumming faster and faster with every tossed sock until I missed

another one. Annabel Lee shook her bangles to build up suspense, and struck the drumskin hard when the sock hit the ground. Nicky did a nice job, filling in the music, making the whole thing sound *comedic*. Tiffany was a trooper, moving in and out of the crowd with the gray flute case, her big green eyes losing none of their charm in the sad whiteface of a clown.

By the time we were done at the Odeon, there were bills and coins all over the lining of Nicky's gray case. I asked Johnny how much he thought we had taken in, but he just shrugged. The Mole passed by and with a single glance at it said, "Twelve dollars, about." Johnny counted, and the paper and coin totaled eleven dollars and eighty-five cents, collected in under half an hour. That spurred us on. We gave a shorter show as we passed the tables at Borders and picked up another two twenty-five. Johnny put all the money in his pocket, as our treasurer. That job should have gone to the Mole, because he always knew what we had left, even though he never touched it. But we didn't stop to discuss it on our first day out, and Johnny scooped it up then, and that's the way it stayed for all the rest of our time together.

"C'mon," said Johnny. "We got another whole block. And then another one after that." He swept his arm up the Promenade, where the stores went on, one after another, for what looked like a mile. There were millions of people milling around, stopping for a slice of pizza or looking in the windows. They all had a quarter to spare, and for the first time we had something of our own to give them in return.

"It's all ours," said Johnny.

Even Annabel Lee didn't argue with him.

We crossed Santa Monica Boulevard and provoked the crowd as we worked our way up the street, playing the flute, guitar, and tambourine to catch people's attention, stopping between the topiary dinosaurs to do our juggling act. It was our best show yet. I understood my role and marched around at the beginning with my chest puffed out, while the Mole did some solo juggling. By the time I took my place as his partner, the tambourine was rolling and the crowd was primed to see something more spectacular. When I dropped my first sock they gasped; but as soon as it happened twice, they got the idea. They were so relieved they wouldn't have to be embarrassed for me, they gave us sixteen dollar and fifty cents.

We practically flew up the Promenade to our next performance, between Johnny Rocket's and the food court near the Mann and AMC Theatres. The people waiting for tickets on the movie lines actually clapped for us. They applauded. Then we went up to Restoration Hardware, where we drew people away from the South American musical troupe, who are always surrounded by a crowd. They left the drums and wind flutes, the actual *musicians*, to watch us and laugh and give us money. Even before we counted it, the Mole told me we had earned over forty dollars in two hours. Any way you figured it, we were a hit.

We celebrated that night back at the Crib. Annabel Lee called it a *cast party on opening night*. Nicky hardly said anything, but you could see she was pleased. She gave Tiffany two chocolate cupcakes with white squiggly lines on top, and let her eat both of them after dinner. Annabel Lee asked Johnny to make an exception to the rule against liquor in the Crib, as a special occasion. She had my vote. But Johnny looked at the both of us and shook his head.

“Our luck is changing,” he said. “We ought to have lots of good days now. If we make an exception for the very first one, we’ll be making special exceptions for all the rest of them. Then where will we be?”

“Feeling good?” I asked.

"Johnny doesn't like to feel good," said Annabel Lee.

He gave her a hard stare. “I feel fine,” he said, and she just looked away.

* * *

The next day he felt more like celebrating. He asked me to take a bus ride with him and then a short walk to a house on one corner of Rose Avenue, on the border of Venice. The sign read *Saint Joseph's Homeless Center* when we went inside. It turned out to be a place where you can sign up for a shower and a laundry, or use the telephone. On the patio out back, we stood in line with some adult homeless, until we reached a woman sitting at a computer behind a small table. She was there to take reservations for a meal the next day at the Bread and Roses Café. Johnny gave his own name to the woman, and both our ages as eighteen, but at the last minute he reminded me that my name was actually *Lee*. That's what she typed into her computer. I didn't ask Johnny any questions at the time, but I had so many afterwards, that he agreed to bring me along the next day, if I agreed to see it and leave. I also had to promise to keep the whole thing absolutely *secret*, which really got my interest. But I agreed, and kept my mouth shut all night, and in the morning Johnny surprised me again by shaving.

He didn't shave much, because his beard didn't grow too fast, and he usually cut up his face when he did. He had an old-fashioned straight razor with a blade that folds into the handle. It was a nice instrument in silvery metal with the initial D engraved on it in cursive script. Johnny never told me where he got it, and Annabel Lee didn't want to talk about it, but she did let me know it had once been his father's. Johnny always kept it in his pants pocket "for security," he said, which meant at first safety on the streets, but when you think about where it came from, might also have had another meaning for him. That morning, Johnny put on his cleanest t-shirt and went down to the public bathroom. He splashed cold water on his cheeks and neck and began scraping off the hairs with the bare edge of the razor. He didn't have a strop, or a styptic pencil, or even shaving cream, so he made a mess of it. But the ruddiness of his smooth face, with little wads of toilet paper stuck all over, made a statement in itself.

After he finished shaving, we went back together on the same cross-town bus. We got off at Rose and Main at nine-fifteen and hung out on the corner until nine-twenty, watching the people go by and throwing things at the cars. Johnny didn't have his usual aim, and he looked nervous, so I asked him, "What are we doing here?"

He said, "Waiting for my date."

I felt guilty at once, thinking about Annabel Lee, and wondering why Johnny had gotten me into this. Couldn't he do his cheating by himself? Now I would have to lie whenever I saw her, and she would probably see through me anyway. I kept on worrying about it, while he didn't seem at all concerned, watching the next bus work its way down Main Street, until it pulled up right in front of us, with a hiss of its brake and a clacking of its swinging doors --

And Annabel Lee climbed off. She said, "Hello, Moses."

Johnny said, "Ready for our date?"

She looked at me quickly. I said to Johnny, "Maybe I should go now."

He shook his head. "Walk with us."

He took Annabel Lee around the waist and started heading up Rose, waving his free hand over his head for me to follow them. Annabel Lee looked back at me, and gave me a smile and tossed her hair, and I knew it was okay with her too if I followed along. We walked six blocks up Rose to what looked like a private home, and went down a side street into the alley. On the patio of the second house, a group of homeless people had already gathered. As we waited, the guest list kept growing, until there were fifty people standing quietly outside the back door. A blackboard listed the menu for the morning: eggs and sausage and toast and coffee. Finally, someone in a baseball cap and an apron opened the door. Inside was a bright room painted pink and blue, with a skylight in its center. High windows in the skylight let in long streaks of sunlight. A large man stood to the left of the door, watchful but silent. To the right was a lectern, and behind it was a woman who had a computer printout. When our turn came, Johnny gave his own name and then shuffled Annabel Lee forward. He introduced her as "Miss Lee," and pointed to the name I had reserved on the printout. Johnny winked at me as the woman motioned them inside, and Annabel Lee gave me a wave good-bye.

I didn't leave right off, but stood another few minutes on the threshold, taking in the room. It was beautiful. The tables were just big enough for two or four people each. There were tablecloths on all of the tables and flowers on all the tablecloths, and classical music playing in the background. There were blue columns supporting the ceiling, and the

walls were pink and blue. In the center of each wall, a ribbon had been painted as a mural, with roses wrapped in its curls. On one wall an embroidered sign said *Bon Appetit*; on another was a framed painting of flowers. Milk and fruit were waiting on the tables, and volunteers passed out pastries to people as they took their seats.

I watched long enough to see Johnny hold out a chair for Annabel Lee, who said, "Thank you," when she sat and laid out her napkin. Then he sat down across from her, and said something I couldn't hear. She laughed, raising her head and stretching her neck but keeping her wide eyes on him. I saw him grin, and pick up his milk, and touch his glass to hers. He drank half of it, and when he set down the glass, he left a moustache of milk on his lip. He waited to catch her eye, twisted his moustache back and forth, and picked up his napkin with a flourish. It fluttered through the air before settling on his lap. When he looked up again at Annabel Lee, his mouth was puckered like a French fish. She made a funny face back at him, scrunching up her rosy cheeks. He poked himself in the nose, and his eyes crossed. She stuck out her tongue. He reached over the table to tickle her, and that's when I made my exit.

14. Emil Yermer

Bay City -- that's what Raymond Chandler called this place. You know his town, with a crooked mayor, cops on the take, and the old chief assigned to the record room in the basement of police headquarters? Santa Monica in the thirties. The gambling boats off the pier ran their own man for mayor, who won the election. He named a new police chief and took over this town -- until Earl Warren chased their ships three miles off the coast. Old Earl drew a line from the westernmost tip of the land to the next most western point and calculated the three-mile limit from that line. It pushed those gambling boats so far out to sea, the waves kept the dice tumbling and the customers vomiting at the rail. They battled on the Pacific, state troopers against the hired guns, and when the smoke finally cleared, the gamblers lost control of City Hall. But it seems to me that the police never figured out who they're working for now.

None of us knew it then, but the same day Johnny and Annabel Lee had their date at Bread and Roses, a man named Emil Yermer sat in a small office in the Santa Monica Police Department with the sun in his eyes. He wore a yellow tie, green shirt, and jacket and pants that hardly matched. His jacket was mustard with brownish buttons, and his pants were yellowish beige. His socks were green and his shoes brown penny loafers with pennies in them. He had sandy hair that was going gray, and watery eyes on either side of his lumpy nose. From where she sat across the desk, Officer Bridget Torwald didn't think he look like the private investigator the Captain had commended and ordered her to assist in any way.

Bridget knew that Emil Yermer had earned a reputation in the eighties as a man who could bring back children from the Hare Krishnas and other cults that had brainwashed them for their money. The cult business was down lately, after the mass suicides, but Mr. Yermer had seen it coming. He had a gift that way. Now he was employed by Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Richter to locate and retrieve their two runaway daughters, Nicole, sixteen, and Tiffany, eleven. He had glossy sheets of paper with their pictures on it, descriptions, and his number to call. He had done a nice job with the glossies, Bridget thought, which showed scanned color Polaroids of each girl from the front, their name under each photo, and a list of their favorite hobbies. If the SMPD had a scanner like his, they could make some fliers with oomph, too, that really got your attention. She had shown the Captain an ad for a scanner that was reasonable enough, and a printer to go with it, but had he done anything about it? Had he shown any initiative?

Now this is what I mean: the police are sworn to protect and serve the people of Santa Monica. Emil Yermer didn't live in Santa Monica, and neither did his two clients. But we did. So shouldn't the police have protected us instead of serving him? They say, "Show, don't tell" around here, so that's what I'm going to do, like a fly on the wallpaper. I wasn't in the room at the time, but I've met Officer Torwald and sized up Mr. Yermer, and this is how I figure it went down.

"I've been to see your counterparts in Beverly Hills and Culver City," Yermer was yammering, "and of course, LAPD. We have reason to believe that the two girls are still in the local area. You'll put out an APB at once, and circulate their descriptions at the morning briefing. But is there anything more you can do?"

Bridget Torwald felt again how unfair it was she should have been named Juvenile Outreach Officer. She was a big girl, nearly six-foot-one in her stocking feet, though she always wore black jackboots. She had blonde hair cut short and bright blue eyes, widely spaced across her untroubled complexion. She had never wanted to be anything except a SWAT team officer. She had given it every ounce of grit, but her scores at the academy were no higher than they needed to be, and her chest, despite a heavy-gauge bra, strained the starched blue cotton of her blouse. Every young buck in the station wanted into her uniform, and they would strut around, until the Captain narrowed his eyes at her. Bridget did not want to be the unholy grail of the SMPD, or the Ice Princess either. She wanted to be one of the guys. She worked out with free weights six days a week, trying to purge herself of every sensitivity. But she was the junior female officer on the force and was assumed to bring special skills to the job of Juvenile Outreach Officer. Bridget had so far demonstrated none, but she didn't judge herself too harshly for it. The juveniles weren't reaching out to her, either.

She took her assignment philosophically, or at least without complaint. According to the book, she had to go to a seminar to prepare for her post, and to the seminar she went. Now she told Emil Yermer exactly what the social worker had told her.

“You want to know what more we can do? Well, so do I. People don't realize the extent of the problem, or how intransigent it is to social remedy.”

Intransigent to social remedy. That line she had written down verbatim in her notepad. She had memorized the next bit too, which had drawn a nod from the Captain the first time he heard her. Bridget leaned toward Yermer, just as far as the social worker had leaned toward her seminar group.

"Let me tell you something: right now, while we're talking, there's a divorcee in Topeka and a widower in St. Louis who have taken a shine to each other. They decide to tie the knot and give marriage another shot. But each of them has two kids, a boy and a girl, and one of those four kids isn't happy about it. Maybe they still love their mama or papa and feel like a traitor, or maybe they have to move from Topeka to St. Louis now, away from all their friends. Maybe they just don't like the individual their parent picked for a second trip to the altar. That kid is going to have a hard time fitting into the new family, and if somebody has to be blamed for any problems, that kid is going to become a *pushout* or *throwaway* kid. It happens all the time. If that kid goes to the movies and reads the fan magazines, he or she is going to show up on a bus at the Hollywood station, where the pimps and pushers are waiting to offer the only gainful employment in town. Sometimes Options House or the L.A. Youth Network find these kids first, but most days they get a very rough welcome to California."

"Not the case with my kids," Yermer said. "The family lives in town."

"That only makes it harder to find them," Bridget replied. "They have friends to help them hide, and they know the local terrain." She liked that phrase, *local terrain*, with its ring of cannon placements and tank routes.

"But if you see 'em, you'll pick them up, won't you?"

Bridget shrugged -- an unusual gesture for a police officer, but the social worker had shrugged. "It's not unlawful in this state simply to run away. During the school year, truancy is the legal issue. These kids have to be in school. If we see them, we can pick them up for that, so most of the time they hide from us, on rooftops or anyplace else they can find. But now is the summer, isn't it?"

He nodded. There was no denying the season.

"That also makes it harder."

She didn't actually mind, making his job harder. But Yermer wasn't the type to do his own job when she was there to do it for him. "They must have broken some law," he said, "in the process of running away."

Bridget sighed, and then immediately regretted it. You might hear the Captain sigh, now and then, but never the patrol officers, who weren't supposed to be defeated by the futility of it all. "Street kids are *status offenders*," she said, "which means their only offense is their status, being young, and we don't put them in jail for that. Sometimes, if we know where their parents live, we call them, and while they're flying out to pick up their kids, we'll put them in SODA beds -- Status Offender Detention Alternatives, out in Palmdale or Lancaster. But we can't lock them up even then, so what do you think they do? Climb out a window and run away again. Their parents show up to claim them, and we have no idea where they've gone."

"These folks live in Brentwood," Yermer said patiently. "They'll stop their kids from leaving again. You can take my word on it."

Bridget Torwald had heard enough of Emil Yermer's words. She had done her duty and was ready to get back to some real police work. She stood up. "Well -- I've got their descriptions, and these fliers, and we'll put out an all-points-bulletin. But I should warn you: they don't usually do much good. The only thing I can suggest is that you go to one of the shelters and hire an outreach worker to go looking for them on the streets."

"They do better than you people?"

He would have to put it that way, wouldn't he? "They have their contacts on the streets, people they've assisted who owe them favors. There are no social services for homeless youth in Santa Monica. Do you know why? Because if you offer services, the kids will come. And with them come the pimps and dealers who prey on them. You want to find needles in Douglas Park? We don't actually help too many people who live on the streets, but we try not to help the kids at all." As soon as the words slipped out, Bridget knew they didn't capture what she meant to say, about tough-love and the rights of ordinary citizens on the sidewalk. By the smile that crept across Yermer's narrow face, she saw that he knew it too. But he stood up and shook her hand before she could add anything to make it sound better.

"Thank you, Officer Torwald, for your time. I'll keep in touch."

15. Bette

We were in the period I think of as our *honeymoon time*, although nobody had gotten married. Johnny and Annabel Lee were getting along better than anyone ever expected. By day they were kind to each other, and that spilled over onto the rest of us. By night you could hardly fall asleep, with the two of them giggling, talking in voices that were too low to hear but soothing anyway. It entered our dreams, making us think it was possible for two hard people to be together, after all. It made me want something like that for myself, and I know the same idea occurred to the Mole. Nicole never talked about anybody except Annabel Lee, who was busy with Johnny. We were all in love with her, one way or another. It opened the whole idea of falling in love with somebody else -- at least it did for me and the Mole. Nicky had her hands full, worrying about a sniffle Tiffany had developed overnight.

We kept up the comedy act during those weeks, though we never did as well as we did on that first day at the Promenade. Anything you have to do becomes a job, even singing, dancing and juggling. Annabel Lee got us made up and dressed whenever she had the desire, but when her spirits lagged, it was Nicky who roused and reminded us that we needed to sing for our supper. We always started in front of the Odeon Theatre near Broadway, because the site of our first success never failed to encourage us. It was there, one Wednesday, I saw a woman in the crowd I would have known anywhere.

Her name was Rebekah, but Jim always called her Bette when I was living in his tent. He brought her home one night. She was too old for me and too young for him, but that didn't stop her, and once he saw how she felt, didn't stop him either. She must have

been seventeen then, but the way she talked and moved around in her dress, she could have been twenty-seven. She cost me a week on the streets that time, before Jim came to tell me she was gone. But I was always curious and rocked myself to sleep more than one night, imagining we met up again. She saw me first, while I was juggling. Or while I was dropping the bean bags and the Mole was juggling. I stooped down to pick one up and saw her long black legs behind my shoulder, rising up like the cedars of Lebanon.

“Walker?” When she spoke half the words whispered out through her front teeth, which were spaced apart. “That you?”

“It’s me,” I said, “Lord!” and had to keep from staring, she looked so good. She was wearing a red dress with blue stripes in it, made of some knit fabric that clung to her sides and showed her hips. No stockings but shoes with heels that lifted her even higher off the ground. Her neck was long, her chin high, and her eyes were round as a doe’s, with long eyelashes and a promise of kindness in them. Her hair was full, and if it hadn’t been styled in a while, she had made an effort to make it behave. That’s one thing men always appreciate, when a woman makes an effort. This time the warmth of her eyes and all the rest of it were making an effort on me.

“You got time for a cup of coffee?” she asked.

We were wrapping up, anyway. Tiffany was going around with the gray case, collecting, before we moved on up the Promenade. The Mole was kneeling by the curb, trying to pick up a dime that had stuck to the sidewalk. I said, “I reckon I ought’a have time for a coffee.”

Bette smiled. “If you got the money, you can buy me one.”

“Oh, he’s got plenty of money,” said Johnny, who was standing behind me close enough to hear what Bette had said. I didn’t even know he was there. He went right over to Tiffany and looked in the gray case. There were eleven dollars in it, plus some silver. Johnny took out all the paper money and handed it over to me. Nicole exchanged a look with Annabel Lee, but Johnny didn’t notice. Maybe he thought he owed me something for helping arrange his own date. But I still didn’t feel right, walking away.

“Don’t you all need me for the act?”

“Walker,” he said, “I believe I can drop a bean bag as well as you can.”

So there we were, standing in the middle of the Promenade after the rest of them had gone, with eleven dollars inside my pocket and Bette pressed up against the outside. She took my elbow in her arms and squeezed it. “It’s so good to see you,” she said, as if we had always been cozy together. I didn’t see any reason to refresh her memory and kept quiet about Jim and the old days.

“Where do you want to go? Inside?” There was a Starbucks on the next block and a Coffee Bean around the corner on Santa Monica Boulevard, but the rest of the Crib had gone that way and I wanted to be alone. *Inside* meant in the closed mall that Frank Gehry had built at the end of Third Street, between Broadway and Colorado. There was a food court inside the north door, where we could get coffee and sweet rolls.

Bette shrugged beautifully, the little gesture raising her slim shoulders so that they picked up her dress and dropped down again, leaving a little space between the scooped neck and her skin. You could see her collarbone, and bulges where her arms started, and a shadow at the top of her breasts. “You really want coffee?”

My personal answer was *No*, but I thought she did, and if we didn't sit down over a cup, what were we supposed to do next? Then I remembered her better. "Would you rather have something else to drink?"

"That's a good idea," she said, as if I had thought of it first.

To tell the truth, the idea seemed like a good one to me too. It had been a couple of weeks since I'd had anything substantial to drink, because Johnny didn't allow it in the Crib, and, I'll admit, I missed it from time to time. I'm no alkie, at least by the standard of the streets. I've seen rummies on the corners like anyone else, and there's no way I'm going to end up like them. But it's not a problem for everybody, and a man who can't hold his liquor is going to have trouble whether or not he knocks a few back with an old acquaintance. But it was still eleven o'clock in the morning, and I was underage, so I didn't want to risk the embarrassment of being turned away in a bar. At nineteen, Bette was underage too, but she didn't look it.

"You want to pick up a nice bottle of wine?" I asked.

"We could," she said, "to celebrate."

"Or we could go over to a supermarket and pick up a whole picnic lunch?"

As far as I was concerned, that made the plan better, and more romantic. I could imagine myself telling Johnny and the Mole, "*We spent a pleasant afternoon together, picnicking in the park with some cheese and olives and a French bread and wine...*"

"Sure," said Bette. "We could."

We went to Vons on Lincoln and found a bottle of red wine for under five dollars. I had been thinking white would go better with our picnic, but Bette didn't want olives, and didn't like their selection of cheeses, and if I hadn't insisted on buying a baguette for

a dollar, she would have passed on that too. Near the pharmacy was a rack of postcards, and I picked out a colorful one that said California Earthquake on the front with a cartoon of buildings shaking. I took that to the counter with our wine and bread and plastic cups shaped like wineglasses. We needed something to drink from, didn't we? While the girl at the checkout was ringing it up, I asked her for a stamp, so the postcard wouldn't arrive postage due.

“My,” Bette said, “you have money for everything, don't you?”

She would have preferred if we bought two bottles of wine. But she didn't make a big thing out of it, and when I asked where she wanted to go, meaning which park for our picnic, she took my arm tightly again and shivered.

“It's too cold to eat outside. Besides,” she said, “this skirt is so short, it's hard for me to sit on the ground. You like this dress, don't you, Walker?”

Yes, I liked her dress. We could find a picnic table down at the beach, where the chess players meet, to help keep her legs together. But that only solved half her problem. If it was really too cold to eat outside, where else could we go?

“We could go to my place,” she said, shyly.

I liked the sound of that --

Until I saw her place. Bette didn't exactly *have* a place, at least not one of her own. She lived in a squat on the south side of town in a building of worn brown bricks that looked like it had been abandoned. Of course, landlords don't entirely abandon any property on either side of Santa Monica. Someone had pushed out the renters, so he could fix up the place and rent it out again for a lot more money, since the rent control laws had changed. Only something had happened halfway through the plan, and the landlord had

run out of cash from leaving his rental units vacant. The building fell apart, but he wouldn't accept any offers to buy it, believing the old heap of bricks was worth more than anyone was offering. It stood condemned, the windows broken or taped up, without heat or electricity or running water, a monument to Speculation with a capital *S*, which was the ruination of affordable housing in this city.

“Been here long?” I asked, when I first saw where she was leading me.

“Couple of weeks. It's not bad inside, and not too crowded.”

We had to climb up a fire escape to get in, through a window on the second floor. There was a kid sitting inside the window with a completely shaved head and a number eight or infinity sign tattooed on his skull. Bette gave him the password *Bizkit* and he let us in. I couldn't guess what Bette was used to, but compared to what I saw inside there, the House of Horrors on Halloween is a quaint old nursing home.

“Gimme a second,” said Bette, “to fix the place up.” And she left me standing in the hallway, blinking, trying to adjust my eyesight. It was daylight outside the building, but inside was pitch dark night.

There must have been twenty kids living there, most of them older than me. The décor was Classic Punk, with pentagrams and arcane symbols spray-painted on the walls. The floor had a carpet of garbage, foul-smelling from decay. I saw something moving that had to be a rat, but they had their own exterminator, too. A tall, skinny guy wearing a leather jacket with torn-off sleeves sat in front of two smaller kids, who watched his every move. In his left hand he wielded an ugly knife, its curved blade notched to wreak maximum damage. In his right he dangled a fat rat by its tail. It made grunting noises and thrashed around but couldn't get its teeth into his flesh.

“Wanna see what we do to rats around here?” he asked the two younger boys. One of them passed a hand over his head, where the stubble was starting to grow back. Neither of them wanted to say anything. They watched the rat squirm, and you could see they were thinking, *There but for the grace of God go I*. But which god was that?

Well, do ya?” demanded their elder.

One boy sat perfectly still. The other boy nodded, glassy eyed.

The knife came down in a single stroke. The rat squealed and its head rolled off, onto the ground. The executioner still held its body, which twitched and spurted blood. He squeezed it twice, forcing out two jets of viscous liquid in the direction of the boys, who jumped out of the way. They stared at the mess on the ground, at the severed head, at the furry body, now soaking up its own blood, and at the older kid who had done the deed with his dripping blade.

“Jeezus,” said the silent one.

“Had nothing to do with it,” said the older boy, and he laughed. This was not the first time he had played this game, and it hadn’t bored him yet. “Now catch me a new one,” he said, “to replace mine.” The two younger kids went off, rummaging through the trash, relieved just to be away from their teacher. He looked over in my direction and noticed the plastic bag from Vons hanging from my elbow. But before he could ask what exactly I had inside it --

“This way,” said Bette, appearing out of the darkness to take my hand and lead me through a passageway, around a door. On the other side she had to set her weight against it to close it behind us. There was a mattress on the floor with a woolen blanket and a black garbage bag full of clothes. She had taken out two dresses and hung them on wire hangers

from a pipe overhead. "Sit down, why don't you? Take a load off. And give me that special present to open."

I took the plastic bag off my arm and handed over the bottle. I kept the baguette with me as I sat on the mattress. Bette didn't object. I reached inside the paper sleeve, broke off one crusty end, and offered it to her. But she was too busy rummaging through the trash bag to notice.

"I know I got one in here, someplace," she said, and the next minute held up her find -- a corkscrew. She settled down to use it. Anticipating what was coming calmed her down, and she got chatty. "That's always the trouble with a good bottle of wine. No screw-off cap."

You might think I didn't notice all this at the time, but I did and didn't mind it. She was a fine-looking woman. We were about to share a drink in her room. It may not have been the Beverly Wilshire, and she may have been more anxious than the sort of woman you find there. But she was sharing a drink and her hospitality, doing her best to be charming. She might have been interested in me only because I could buy a bottle -- I won't argue with that. But if you're going to be so honest, you ought to show a little sympathy too. I'm not saying this just because I wanted her. I did want her, and counted myself lucky for the chance. But there was more to it than just that. I won't call it *pity*, because I don't want anybody to think I felt superior to her. I stretched out on her old mattress, and when she opened the bottle and poured two plastic cups, she came over and set them on the floor next to the mattress. She sat down, handed me one, and stretched herself out beside me.

"You like my place?"

“I hate your place. But I like you.”

“Yeah? What do you like?”

“I already told you I liked your dress. I like your shoes, too.” I sipped my glass and set it down. “And I like what’s inside your clothes.”

I nuzzled her neck while she emptied her own drink. “Uh huh.”

That meant, *Go on*. “I like the way your neck keeps your chin up, and the way your hair flips up. I like the way you pat it back. I like the way you make your eyes big, even when you’re not really all that surprised. I like the way your lipstick is sitting on your front tooth, where you missed this morning.”

She rubbed her tooth with her finger. “There’s no light in this place.”

“I see. It’s romantic. Now, what do you like about me?”

She laughed and refilled her wineglass. She drank it down and filled it up again, but she didn’t fill mine. “I like your make-up, too.”

I had forgotten that I was still wearing two red diamonds on my cheeks. I sat up. “Give me a towel, if you have one. Or a rag to wipe it off.”

Instead, she drew me back down to the bed. “No, I like it, I said.” She kissed me on each cheek, closing my eyes. Then she kissed me on the mouth, and as she did, her hands started moving over me. I reached for the place her dress gave out, over her thighs. She moved her hips to help me. I don’t think it’s gentlemanly to write any more, but if you still think she got the better of me, for a bottle of five-dollar wine, all I can say is, *You’re crazy*.

16. Rebekah

We spent the night in Bette's room, and I mean in her *room*. The sheet of plywood nailed over her window allowed in cracks of light all around it, but when the sun went down the light went colored and the noises from the street went weird. The squat had no electricity. There was a toilet down the hall, but you didn't want to go in there. We had no lock on the door, so Bette took a piece of cardboard from a packing box, folded it over and stuck it under the door. Still we had a nice time, falling asleep together. But in the middle of the night, I woke up to hear someone screaming, "WHEN YOU GET TO THE BOTTOM YOU GO BACK TO THE TOP OF THE TRACK!" It's the Beatles, all right, but if you know anything about California history, you do not want to hear any lunatic screaming that song in the middle of the night. I got up, and Bette pulled me down again.

"It's nothing. He's all right. Just leave it be."

"I'm not going to mess with anybody," I said and broke free long enough to go over to the door and kick that piece of cardboard to make sure it was still secure.

Afterwards we heard somebody else crying.

The next morning, Bette said she'd rather get another bottle than waste our money on breakfast, but I insisted on a couple of bagels, because I didn't want to spend another night in that squat, and knew we couldn't go back to the Crib if we were drunk. That was Johnny's rule, and though it seems like a good idea in retrospect, it was hard on us then, especially on Bette. She didn't see the sense in it, and I couldn't explain it to her, but she did believe me when I said there were better places to live in than her squat. She came along with me, complaining most of the way, but trusting me long enough to check it out.

You might not believe it, but her trust mattered to me. It didn't come easily, but Bette gave it to me that morning, letting me take her hand and lead her through Palisades Park to the Crib.

I won't say they gave us a warm reception when we showed up together, though they all said they were glad to see me again. Johnny shook my hand and asked if I was all right. He tilted his head, as if he were trying to see the back of my eyes. I said, "Sure I am," and introduced him to Bette. He took her hand and shook it too, as if we were a couple of explorers who had conquered the Arctic with dog sleds. The women looked at us as if we were still out on the frozen ice with the polar bears.

"This is Bette," I said to Annabel Lee.

"Rebekah," she corrected, catching me by surprise. She hadn't used that name with me the day before. Women live a life among themselves that has nothing to do with the life they share with the hairier half of the species.

I pointed out the rest of us. "Annabel Lee. Nicky and Tiff."

Bette squatted down in front of the cot where Tiffany was sitting. "That's a pretty dress you have on. Tiffany, is it?"

"Uh huh."

"I had one just like it, when I was a little girl."

Tiff didn't know what to say. Annabel Lee did. "You're an old friend of Moses, is that right, Rebekah?"

"Of Moses? Of Walker. Yeah, we go 'way back."

"Sly boots," she said to me. "How come you never told us about her?"

I shrugged. "Never thought about her." But I could see from Bette's reaction that wasn't exactly what she wanted me to say.

"We're just getting ready to go out," Johnny announced.

I had noticed that for myself. Nicole had her flute out of its case and was fitting the pieces together. Johnny's cheeks were streaked with white. Our shoulder pads were on the cot beside Tiffany, who dug one out of the pile and put her head through the hole. Johnny grabbed another. Annabel Lee put a hand over his face while he slipped it on, and tucked her own under her elbow. Nicole put on hers and applied Tiffany's face paint. That left the last one for me. I picked it up and had my head halfway through the hole when I heard Bette ask, "Don't I get one?"

Annabel Lee answered, "Do you mean you'd like to join us?"

"Walker invited me."

"What can you do?" asked Nicole, saving me the trouble of saying anything.

"I can dance," said Bette, "well as *anybody here*."

Annabel Lee rattled her tambourine. "But you don't have an instrument, do you?"

Bette flicked the taut skin with her finger. "I can play that one."

"Not while I'm playing it," said Annabel Lee.

"We could take turns, couldn't we? You first, then me?"

That must have been a stab at compromise, to placate Annabel Lee. But Bette had touched a nerve with her crack about the dancing, and Annabel Lee said evenly, "Why don't you get your own instrument?"

"Why don't we sit this one out," I suggested to Bette. "I don't feel like going out today, anyway. I want to show you the sunset from our back yard. They might not be home in time from the Promenade."

Bette beat a tactical retreat. "If you want to, Walker."

That bought us a couple of hours. Johnny made sure that the rest of them went off without too much complaint, and Bette and I had the place to ourselves for a little while. The sun went down over the ocean, and we watched from a bench in the park. Bette said she could pick up some castanets from someone in a mariachi band. I opened a can of spaghetti and meatballs for us, and we ate it cold on the cot. It was a nice dinner, and I think Bette felt pretty good about coming to the Crib. But as soon as the others returned, the trouble picked up where it had left off.

"Still here?" said Annabel Lee when she came into the Crib and found the two of us together on the cot.

"I thought we might spend the night," I said.

She shrugged. "That's up to you."

Nicole came in, holding Tiffany's hand, half dragging her. "I haven't got a tissue. Let me get a handkerchief from my pack."

Tiffany was sniffing.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Nothing," said Tiff.

"She might be getting a cold," said her sister, wiping her nose and half her face with a man's cotton handkerchief.

"I am not," said Tiffany. "I just got something in my nose."

"Blow," said Nicole. "Again."

Tiffany blew. But her eyeballs were cracked with red, and when she spoke she sounded every bit as nasal as before. "See?"

"I hear," said her sister, "and I don't like what I'm hearing. Put on your parka." She meant the pink and white ski jacket. "And crawl in under the blanket. I'm going to heat up some soup."

Nicole had picked up some cans of sterno and put them aside in her pack. Now she took one out and set it into an empty soup can that she had sawed in half. She lit the sterno with a match, opened a can of chicken with stars, and propped it on the ragged upper edge of the sawed-off can. The soup began to tremble, then to simmer, and a smell of chicken filled the Crib.

Annabel Lee rummaged through a paper bag under the table and said to Johnny, "Anybody want an apple?"

He took one and bit into it.

Bette was watching the sterno flame burn at the bottom of the homemade stove. She lifted her eyes, and I thought she was going to ask for some soup, but she murmured just to me, "Why didn't we use one of those to warm our meatballs?"

"They're Nicky's," I explained.

"She bought them herself? With her own money?"

"It's all our money," I said. "But some things belong to one person."

"Like, what did you ever get for yourself?" I couldn't remember, but she took a wild guess. "A postcard?"

That was it. One that showed Venice Beach, drawn by R. Crumb. People were skateboarding and writing on walls and juggling chainsaws, and women were standing in front of beachfront condos in fishnet stockings with their nipples sticking through their shirts. I wasn't sure I could send it to Gran, because of that. But I had liked it on the rack and Annabel had stuck it into the cart for me, and Johnny had paid for it at the register without asking any questions.

And later, when it was time to turn in, things got even closer. The Crib was large enough for two people comfortably, three if they were friendly, and four if they didn't mind anybody else's feet in their face. We had six in there before, and Bette made seven. And the fact that she and I were a couple made the logistics trickier. Nicole and her sister retired to the space beneath the table, which had more or less become theirs. The Mole set his back to the door, leaving the cot free. Annabel Lee plopped right down on the cot, stretched and yawned. That left the empty space between the cot and the table for Bette and me, across from the door. It was big enough for the two of us, so I spread out my blanket there, but when Bette realized where we were going to sleep, she shook her head.

"How come they get the cot?"

"We were here first," said Annabel Lee. That wasn't the whole story. We usually took turns, with whoever needed it most getting the cot overnight. It was true, however, that Johnny and Annabel Lee needed it more often than anybody else.

"I got a bed at the squat," Bette reminded me.

"Then go use it," said Annabel Lee.

I looked at Johnny, who said, "I don't care who gets the cot tonight."

Annabel Lee glared at him.

"Except we happen to be on it already, so you can have it tomorrow night," he told Bette, like Solomon. It made sense to me. We settled down for the night, with only the light from outside framed in the window, when a voice in the darkness added:

"Unless we need it tomorrow."

Bette sat up. "For what?"

"For anything," said Annabel Lee. "You never know, do you?"

"Shut up," said Johnny, "and go to sleep."

There was silence, after that. But I could see Bette's eyes, wide open in the dark, thinking over what was said and how she might have answered differently. And if you listened you could hear Tiffany sniffing into Nicky's handkerchief.

* * *

The next day Bette went to see her friend in the mariachi band and came back with a couple of maracas. They weren't the kind I expected, with wooden handles and a round top, painted in Mexican designs. They were made of plastic, one entirely green and the other entirely blue, each of them made from two molded halves glued together with other bits of plastic rattling around inside. The mariachi band gave them out when they performed at parties.

To avoid problems on the street, we split up the troupe. Johnny, Annabel Lee, Nicky and Tiff went out first, starting on the south end of the Promenade near the Odeon, while Bette, me and the Mole started at the north end, in front of Restoration Hardware. Our group had the juggling, and Bette dancing, and the beat of her maracas. Their group

had the flute, and Johnny on his plastic guitar, and Annabel Lee dancing, and Tiffany working the crowd with her hungry eyes. They were red-rimmed that morning, still huge but watery from her cold. A sympathetic person might mistake the moisture for tears. Still, when we met up on the middle block by the topiary dinosaurs, they had earned less than twelve dollars and we had earned half of that.

"Six dollars?" said Bette. "That's what we got?"

"Count it yourself," said the Mole.

It didn't surprise me. The Mole and I were used to working to the rhythm of Nicky's flute, and the maracas didn't give us as much to work. Bette was a good dancer, but the kind of dancing she did was like Salt 'n' Pepa or TLC -- it was sexy and soulful but didn't really lend itself to a juggling act. It all didn't quite fit together, so when I dropped a bean bag, it looked like I had just made a mistake. The Mole didn't say much while Bette was adding up the coin, but I could tell he was thinking it wasn't going to prove too profitable, on our side. And the way Tiffany was hovering over him, it looked like they missed us too.

"Six oh seven," said Bette. "But we've still got half the Promenade to go."

The Mole didn't look so sure, and it turned out he had reason. If you give a dollar to a little girl with a painted face while her big sister plays the flute, you are not about to give another dollar to an older painted face with maracas.

By the time we reached Broadway, we had earned a total of eight-seventy-three, and Bette was thirsty. The Mole thought we should get the others, pool our earnings, and see what we could put together for supper. He was hoping they had done better than we did. That was all right with me -- next time our group might do better than theirs. But

Bette didn't like the idea of us asking them for a handout. She thought we should stop off at Vons ourselves and see what we could pick up. I knew what she had in mind and said, "No alcohol in the Crib."

She looked at me. "Why not?"

"That's the rule," I told her. "It's hard sometimes for me too, but that's the way it is. No alcohol or drugs."

"Whose rule is that?" I think she expected me to say *Annabel Lee's*.

"Johnny's. He's the one who found the Crib."

She fell silent and seemed to accept that. Which only reminds me how differently work the minds of men and women.

When we got back to the Crib, the others were waiting. They didn't mind if we pooled our earnings, not even Annabel Lee, who took some pleasure in being able to say, "We look out for each other, here." She started to plan a menu we could buy with what we had earned. Nicky needed to pick up some female thing, and Tiff wanted to go along, and so did the Mole. I said I would come too, because I needed to patch things up with Annabel Lee and didn't mind a chance to do it without Bette listening to every word. She was tired from her first day of dancing, and hadn't slept very well on the floor, she said. Whenever I noticed during the night, she was snoring, but there could have been times I was sleeping and she wasn't. It happens, with couples.

The only other person who didn't want to come was Johnny, who hated to go food shopping because the security guards never took their eyes off of him. Supermarkets in California are something to see. They sell alcohol, for one thing -- rows of wine and fifty kinds of beer, even hard liquor like tequila and vodka. In glass cases near the registers they

keep bottles that sell for hundreds of dollars apiece. I don't know why anyone would pay hundreds of dollars for a bottle of Johnny Walker Blue when you can get ten bottles for the same money with another color label. The food aisles are five miles wide and sell every sort of snack you ever wanted. I knew one reason why Johnny didn't like going into supermarkets: they show you all the things you could have if you had enough money. When you don't have enough money, but do have plenty of room in your pockets, it's practically entrapment. He didn't want to get caught stealing, so the safest course for him was to stay out of those places.

Personally, I love supermarkets. They're like stepping out on a Broadway stage. They're lit up so brightly, and around you are nothing but choices. We had some money. We couldn't buy everything but we could buy any one thing, or nearly anything, and the choice was wholly ours. From the moment we stepped on the mat and the door slid open before us, we entered a world of shrink-wrapped possibility. So which will it be? What goes home with us? We walked down aisles of cookies and cakes, sodas and pretzels and chips and candies. Should we get something healthy? Make our money stretch? Or go for broke, and pig out entirely? Each choice had its pros and cons, and each its advocate among us. Nicole kept talking about canned food and fresh vegetables, while Tiff and the Mole dragged our cart into the candy aisle, and I was drawn to the bread. I loved just standing there, breathing in the smell. Annabel Lee took a few sniffs herself, and said she knew what I meant, but would only buy a seventy-nine cent loaf of store-brand wheat bread and loaded the cart with cans.

I once heard a story that a Russian visiting this country was taken to see a modern American supermarket, and he came away feeling sorry for us. His host asked him why,

and he said, "You Americans must be very poor, since you can't even afford to buy food." When asked what made him think so, he explained, "It's all still there, on the shelves!" If you ask me, that was what ended the Cold War more than any missile defense system -- pictures of our supermarkets stuffed to the rafters with things you can buy to eat. Shelves of food in pretty packages, just waiting for you. Imagine how they looked to Russians, lining up to buy potatoes. Or to hungry Americans right now, lining up to get a free meal at a shelter or a church.

Like all the things you've ever wanted but couldn't have.

17. Cancún

This next part I have to tell according to somebody's version. Parts of it might be inaccurate or invented. That wouldn't surprise me. But it's more or less what Johnny told us, and what we chose to believe.

After the rest of us left for the supermarket, Bette went out for a walk in the park, and Johnny fell asleep on the cot. That much rings true. Johnny liked to cat-nap when nobody else was around, and before I went I saw him yawning already. Bette would have gone for a walk, too, in part because she was feeling so cranky, talking aloud to nobody, and in part to see if she could find herself something to drink. Johnny says the next thing he knew, he opened his eyes, and she was sitting on the ground next to the cot with her legs curled up beneath her.

"Have a nice nap?" she asked him.

Her head and shoulders were higher than he was, lying on his back, so he sat up on the edge of the cot and rubbed his face. "Nobody's back yet?"

"I'm back," she pointed out, clamping her teeth on a sewing needle.

"Did you go somewhere?" asked Johnny.

She shifted her position, sitting back and drawing up her knees in front of her so that she could put some stitches into her dress where the hem had fallen down. "Uh huh," she said. "For a walk."

Johnny leaned back, resting on his elbows. That brought his legs closer, so it wasn't surprising when she picked up a spool of black thread from the floor and set it on his knee. "Hold that for me, will you?"

He had to keep his knee steady, to balance it there, as she brought her hem up to her mouth and bit off the end of her thread. Then she took the spool of thread and held it where it was, so that she could stick the needle into it. The feel of her fingertips on his thigh made his skin tingle right through his pants, which were Levi denims. She held that spool in place with her right hand, even after the needle was in it, and then her left hand touched his other leg, as if to steady herself.

"What are you doing?" he said, but didn't move his leg, since the spool was still balanced on top of it.

"Can't you tell?" She looked him straight in the eyes.

What was Bette thinking? Something about Johnny's being in charge, I expect, his rule against alcohol and how she could get him to change it. Or something about Annabel Lee, getting back at her. Maybe even something about me. Maybe she wasn't thinking at all. With those feelings percolating in her brain, she just walked in and found him sprawled out on the cot. The opportunity arose and she reached for it because it happened to be there.

Which is when Johnny claims he told her, "I can't."

"You don't have to do anything, baby," she said sweetly. "Except close your eyes. Or you can watch, if you want to."

"Hold on." He hesitated. "I'd love to. But there's Annabel Lee."

That's what he told us, but I can guess what Johnny was thinking at that point. From the moment she touched him, he had nothing to gain by stopping her. Before then, if Annabel Lee ever asked what happened, he could honestly have answered, *Nothing*. But after, what could he say, exactly? *I put away my bone*? That wouldn't buy him any points

for loyalty. If Annabel Lee asked, *How did it get out in the first place?* he'd be stuck for an answer. Letting it go that far meant Johnny had nothing to lose by letting it go all the way. His only hope was that Annabel Lee never found out -- and his best chance of keeping it a secret was to go along with Bette. She might not talk about it, for reasons of her own. But if he made her angry, she would definitely spill the beans, just to get even with him. From that point of view, Johnny's safest course of action was to lie back and worry about the rest later.

Men think like this -- we do. We want to be loyal and true, but the signal gets confused once physical contact is made. If Bette had propositioned him, Johnny would have refused and stood firm behind it. Maybe *firm* isn't the best word for it. But the way she approached him took too little effort to say *yes* and too much effort to say *no*. His indecision was enough to sink him. Only, on this particular occasion, it didn't matter how Johnny figured it, because before they had finished, or really got into it, the Crib's door swung open and Annabel Lee walked in.

She stood a second, frozen, watching Bette's head turn and their four eyes swing her way. It must have been quite a picture. Then Annabel Lee went ballistic, kicking Bette's rear end, shoving her forward into Johnny, who hollered, grabbing himself. Bette sat up and tried to think what to say. Johnny looked at Annabel Lee as if to say, *How could you do this to me?* Annabel Lee just growled, "Get her out of here. Get her out!"

Under the circumstances, Bette got.

I was still at Vons. Annabel Lee had paid the bill and went ahead, leaving us to carry home the packages. Tiffany wanted to ride in the shopping basket, and I didn't mind pushing it over the cracks of the sidewalk. Nicky came along with us to catch her little

sister in case she tumbled out, while we clattered down one curb or up another. It took us fifteen minutes longer than Annabel Lee to reach the Crib. By the time I got home with Nicky and Tiffany, Bette was gone. Johnny had a bag of ice over his crotch, and Annabel Lee was pressing down hard enough to make him cry out in pain.

"Take it easy, will you?" Johnny said.

"Where's Bette?" I asked.

Annabel Lee glanced at Tiffany with the kind of look that made Nicole exclaim, "Tiff? Let's go wash your hands!"

Then they told me. Or Annabel Lee said, "Tell him," and Johnny gave me his version of the story, pretty much as you heard it already. As soon as he started, my scalp began to tingle, and the whole back of my skull went cold. He said *I'm sorry* about a million times, but what difference did that make?

I think my attitude surprised him, when I listened to the whole sad story and said, "You mean she left? Without a word?"

He looked like he might have said something, but only nodded.

"Too bad," I said.

Annabel Lee wasn't satisfied. "Mo-ses -- "

Johnny began apologizing again.

I cut him off with a shrug. "Hey, she doesn't belong to me. We weren't married. We spent two nights together, the first one on a drunk. The second night, we just slept alongside each other. That didn't give me papers on her, did it?"

Johnny liked the sound of that, but Annabel Lee made a horrible face, and he just oozed regret. "Still, I shouldn't have done it."

"If you feel that way," I told him, "then maybe you shouldn't have. But that was between you and Bette."

"You're letting him off too easy," Annabel Lee complained, socking him in the elbow. "The little shit."

Johnny rubbed his funny bone. "Oww."

"Did I hurt you?" she asked. "Sorry."

"I said I'm sorry, okay? I wasn't thinking."

"You weren't feeling, either."

"You're right! I was a slab of meat --"

"An animal."

"Okay, a beast. Grrr."

"And you're still proud of it! You're such a jerk sometimes." She turned away from him and laid her hand on my wrist, softly, to console me. "She didn't deserve you, Moses. Someday you'll find somebody who will. You're a fine person. Bette wasn't good enough for you."

For some reason I couldn't stand the feel of her hand on my wrist at that moment. My frozen skull went white hot and I shook her fingers off. "Oh, yes she is," I insisted, trying to keep my voice down. It came out a hiss.

Annabel Lee stared at me.

I couldn't say then what I felt, which was this: Bette *was* good enough. She was good enough for anybody. You tell someone they're nothing but trash and they start to feel like trash, rummaging through dumpsters for trash to eat. People are good enough to be loved. Bette had her problems, like the rest of us, and because she looked so good so

young, she probably had more of them, sooner than most people do. She was trying to make the best of them, like the rest of us, and if she hoped for too much too fast, or tried to change her life when she saw a chance -- did that make her less than anybody else? But I couldn't say it, and Annabel Lee was still staring, waiting for me to say something more. So I went outside.

I went out to breathe. The night air was sweet with jasmine and oleander, with a touch of sea-salt. I crossed the path and took a seat on the concrete fence overlooking the Pacific. It was black under a nearly full moon. The beach sand glistened like a thousand shards of glass. The moonlight rode the hoods of cars, whose headlights and taillights snaked up the highway. The Crib looked like it was made of marble, a prefab mausoleum. Splinters of moonlight glinted in the bottom of the pit, as if there were things in the mud crawling up toward the stars.

Okay, maybe I went outside to get away from them. Besides, the light was better in Palisades Park. From my coat pocket I fished out a pencil and the postcard that said *Earthquakes Los Angeles*. I began printing on it, and before I was finished, Annabel Lee came out. She stood behind me and watched over my shoulder as I wrote down Gran's address, alongside my usual message: *Still here. Love you. Walker*. When I turned the card over, she saw the front and asked me where I got it. I told her about the supermarket where Bette and I had gone to buy wine and a loaf of bread. Could that have been just the morning of the day before?

Annabel Lee nodded as if she understood more than I was willing to say. It made me wonder what that was. All she said was, "Why send her a card from Los Angeles? When there are only like a million cards that say, *Scenic Santa Monica*."

I said I didn't want Gran to know where I was, so she couldn't come looking for me. She wouldn't be able to come anyway, but I didn't want her to feel that she *could* have found me if only she had tried harder. I sent her a couple of cards from Mammoth Mountain and Hawaii, because she knew I had never been to either of those places. It was sort of a code between us, only she didn't have the code book, so I had to make sure she understand exactly what I meant and what I didn't. When I wrote I was *still here*, I meant alive on the planet.

Annabel Lee was staring out at the black ocean under the stars. She had started doing it when I said *Mammoth Mountain* and *Hawaii*. I wasn't sure she was listening any more, until she suddenly said, "If you could be anywhere in the world right now, Moses, where would you be?"

"Cancún," I told her.

"Where is that?"

"Mexico. What they call the Mayan Riviera. I saw it on MTV. All these kids, millions of them -- blacks and whites together -- wearing hardly any clothes but partying all night long. Wasting their brain cells as fast as they can."

"You're talking about Spring Break?"

"I guess."

"You know what that's a break *from*?"

"College. But I figure somebody has to keep the place going in between breaks, right? Okay, so you have two weeks a year that are absolute hell, spent cleaning up after college kids, and fifty on the beach when it's just you and the guy who fixes the cabins.

Maybe even *be* the guy who fixes drainpipes and unplugs the toilets when they go home.
How about you?"

She shook her head. "I can't see myself in a bikini bottom and a straw hat."

"Where would you be, if you could?"

"I don't know, for sure. Not too far from here. I mean, college first, of course.
Then someplace like Mar Vista."

If she had said Malibu or the Marina, I wouldn't have thought twice. Anyplace near the ocean. "What's in Mar Vista?"

She shrugged. "Nothing. Except houses. There's no reason to go there, unless you happen to own one."

Johnny came out looking for her, but made it sound like he was worried about me.
"How you doing, Moses? You okay?"

"I'm fine," I said.

He nodded. "At least you had somebody, for a little while."

"For what it was worth," said Annabel Lee.

Johnny tried to take her around the waist, but she pushed him away.

"I'm fine," I said again.

But I wasn't, really. I was worried about something. Bette knew we lived there. She wasn't the kind of girl who would go blabbing to anybody just to hear herself talk. Not if there was nothing in it for herself. But there might be something in it for her. There were people out there looking for Tiffany and Nicole. If anybody made it worth her while to talk about the six of us, she would. Or she might. Just having her out there made our world a little more dangerous.

18. Boo

You might have picked up already that I like to sleep more than the rest of them. If anyone's still in bed after the others have gone, chances are it's going to be me. That's the way it was one Friday morning, when I opened my eyes, on my back, on the floor, to see a nicely dressed black man sitting on the cot with a feathered hat in his hands. His long black coat hung open to show its blue silk lining. He was leaning forward, watching me wake up, and when my eyes cleared enough to see that he wasn't part of my dream, he smiled down at me.

"Good morning." His voice was low and deep, and sounded in the close space of the Crib too confident we would stay alone.

I rubbed my eye with my knuckle. "Who the hell are you?"

He gave me a toothy smile. Gold glittered in the back corners. "Nice manners.

I am a guest in your home."

That's another thing I hate about adults. They think they can teach you whatever they feel like, whenever they feel like it. Here it was, the crack of day, or the crack of my day at least, and already I was being criticized on my lack of politeness by an adult I had never met before. I loosed a big yawn in his face.

"Pardon me," I mumbled.

He looked at the window, to give me a chance to get up and arrange my clothes with some privacy. He was familiar with kids, you could see that. He sat on the very edge of the cot, as if he wasn't sure what might be living in the mattress. He wore a suit, in the morning, black with pink in the pinstripes. His shirt was pink, with a black tie that had

white and pink triangles. The hat in his hands was black with a pink band and a small feather, white with streaks of black. He looked like he had a few thousand dollars tucked away in some bank account. On the street that usually means one thing.

“You looking for somebody?” I asked him.

He smiled again and froze it there, so I would know he could turn it on and off. “She’s living in this shit-hole, isn’t she?”

“Who?”

“It’s worse than a prison cell.” He was looking around the Crib.

“Nobody’s keeping you here.”

“That’s true,” he said, as if it were a new idea. “You come and go as you please, like you can’t do on the inside. Smart boy.”

Normally I would have said, *Don’t call me boy*, but something about the way he sat on our cot made me hold my tongue. He hadn’t said one word that was threatening, outright, but when he smiled it gave you the chills. On the second finger of his right hand was a diamond ring, and you knew he wore that because the stone would cut your face pretty badly when he hit you.

I stood and stretched. “I got to get something to eat.” I didn’t mean it to sound like I was asking his permission, but that’s the way he took it.

“Go ahead.” He waved his hat in the direction of the door. But as I started for it, he continued, “Only do one thing for me. The next time you see Annabel Lee, tell her that Boo has forgiven her. She can come home, and work off the money. We’ll figure something out. It’s hard to say you’ve made a mistake, I know that. But it’s better to admit

she has, and put it behind us. Tell her nothing bad is going to happen to her, if she just comes home. You think you can remember all that, without writing it down?"

I told him I had the general idea.

"That's good," he said. "You've already showed me you're a smart boy. Now be a smart boy when it counts." This time he didn't smile at all.

When I got out into the air I felt like I had escaped, but there was a white guy in a black t-shirt waiting outside the door. His nose was smashed like a pumpkin top, but his eyes didn't flicker like a jack-o-lantern. He watched me until our visitor came out of the Crib and stood with his hands folded in front of him, admiring the ocean. Then he cast an eye at me that made Pumpkinface look like a schoolboy. The muscle crossed his arms, but the black man had it all over him, just buttoning up his coat. They headed for a gold Lexus parked on Ocean Avenue, and I felt like running away all over again.

* * *

When Annabel Lee came home with Johnny and the Mole, I didn't say anything, at first. It wasn't hard, because Annabel Lee was talking so much, making a big thing out of the fact that the Mole had fallen in love. That wasn't the way he phrased it, of course. The Mole didn't say anything, either because he couldn't, or because she was filling the airwaves with so much chatter, he couldn't get a word in edgewise. He looked even more shell-shocked than usual, but he listened to find out what happened to him when Annabel Lee told the story.

"We started out as always," she said, "by the Cineplex Odeon. You know those fountains, with the wire dinosaurs covered in leaves? Nicky took up a position where her flute played over the sound of the water. Very pretty. I started dancing in the center of the Promenade, where there's room. Johnny was behind me, making flamenco poses that never would've been part of any sixteenth-century Italian *commedia dell'arte* troupe, if anyone was watching that closely."

She gave Johnny a look that said he ought to know better, but Johnny just struck another flamenco pose, with one hand above his head.

"Anyway," she said, "the Mole was doing his bean-bag thing, working his way down the row of tables along the street, from Remy to the Broadway Deli and back, with Tiffany following behind him carrying the flute case. He's watching the juggling bags with one eye and the tables with the other, slowing where he might pick up a tip -- when all of a sudden, he stops in his tracks. I mean he *freezes*, one foot still behind the other, ready to take the next step but unable to *move*. In front of him at a table along the rail sit a family of four, very proper and upright, as if we were painting their portrait. Father at one end of the table, in a charcoal suit and black striped tie. Mother at the other end, also in a smart gray suit. Beside Mother is their little boy, wearing a silk shirt, and between him and Father sits a Girl in White.

"She had on a white confirmation dress with plenty of lace -- the kind they wear under their robes in church. She had white shoes, a white bag, and a white orchid tied to her forearm with a curly pink ribbon. Her face was oval, her skin the color of coffee the way Peruvians drink it, a lot of milk with a single shot of *café* mixed in. Around her neck she wore a gold chain with the name *Priscilla* worked into it. She had tiny, round teeth,

though she hardly ever opened her mouth wide enough to see inside, even while she ate her salad. She never looked up, so all we could see of her eyes were long, curving lashes. Except once. In that second, when she did glance up, her big brown eyes startled me, while the Mole just --"

Johnny laughed, but Annabel Lee went on:

"He's standing there, staring at her, as the bean bags come down, *bing! bang! bong!* The first lands on his arm, the second on his shoulder, and the third catches him right on his head. It made a sound you don't want to hear, like bopping a watermelon. The Mole hasn't even felt it. Johnny has to go and close his mouth for him. Father sees the two of them staring, and frowns. I pulled them away, before we had a scene with the manager that would've meant trouble for us the next time we wanted to play."

Johnny shrugged. "We could've handled it."

"If we had to," said Annabel Lee. "Which we won't, now."

"We'll never know," Johnny replied. "Will we?"

"I will," insisted Annabel Lee. Then she turned back to me.

"The Mole was like a stone to move, like a statue. It would have been easier if he had been on wheels. I caught one look at his face and guessed what must've happened. When I saw her sitting there, I knew for sure."

She nodded at me, as if I should have known it too. "What?"

"The Mole fell in love."

Johnny cleared his throat and spit the phlegm out the door. "Or else he came down with a bad case of indigestion. Either way, it amounts to the same thing."

"That's so dumb," said Annabel Lee.

"Why? You think he's got any chance at all with her?"

"Everybody," she declared, "has a *chance*."

Johnny snorted and turned to me. "You should'a seen this guy. Her Papa, I mean. In the old days, he would've come after us with a dueling pistol. Now, he'll settle for a bullwhip, if the Mole ever shows on his doorstep. Which might be possible if we had any idea where his doorstep *is*."

"Oh, we know that," said Annabel Lee.

"We do?"

"*We* don't," she said, "but I do."

"Where?"

"The fifteen hundred block of Alta," she told him. "Fifteen thirty one, to be exact. Ms. Priscilla Suarez. You can check the mail in the mailbox."

"How do you know that?" asked Johnny.

"Some of us use our heads for more than a place to keep our hats."

"How?"

"When I saw the way he was looking at you, I knew what he'd do next. So I went inside and asked the cashier for change of a dollar. She said I'd have to wait until she opened the register. That meant I could stand there until Priscilla's waiter came by with the bill, and her father's credit card. The carbon on the receipt read, *Eduardo Suarez, 1531 Alta*."

"Smart girl," said Johnny, as if he were proud of her.

"Thank you," said Annabel Lee.

She sounded pleased, too, so Johnny turned to the Mole. "What do you think? Want to take a shot at Ms. Priscilla Suarez of 1531 Alta? Or throw yourself down a flight of stairs and figure you got off lucky?"

The Mole looked from one of us to the next. Annabel Lee's eyebrows went up in encouragement, while Johnny's bunched together in the middle of his forehead. I didn't want to see the Mole humiliated, but Priscilla could do something besides rejecting him, couldn't she? In the absence of any consistent cues from us, the Mole said the only thing he was actually feeling. "She was pretty."

Annabel Lee beamed.

Johnny shrugged. "Get out your handkerchiefs."

Annabel Lee started poking through her backpack until she found a paperback held together by a blue rubber band. "I'll see you later," she told the Mole.

"Where are you going now?" asked Johnny.

"I told Nicky I would keep her company, while they waited for someone to see Tiff at the emergency room." She saw my face and assured me, "It's nothing -- just that stupid sniffle she hasn't been able to shake."

"She doesn't need the emergency room," said Johnny.

"No," said Annabel Lee, "Not while she has Dr. Doe here to prescribe Robitussin. But that's where she is, so that's where I'm going." She left the Crib without giving him any chance to reply.

And without giving me a chance to say anything either. I didn't mind that, really. I wasn't sure how to tell her about Boo's visit, and this gave me a chance to ask Johnny, who knew her better than anybody. He listened to my story, and when I had finished, he

asked me to describe the man who had been sitting on the cot when I woke up. After I did, Johnny nodded.

"You haven't told her yet?"

I shook my head. "I didn't get a chance."

"It's not going to make her day. You understand that, right?"

I told him I had guessed that.

"Moses," he said finally, "would you mind if I broke the news to her?"

My first reaction was grateful relief that I wouldn't have to do it myself. Then another thought occurred to me. "When would you do it?"

"When?"

"Today? Or tomorrow?"

"When I think the time is right," he said. "When she's feeling good about herself. Good enough to brush it off -- or at least to hear it, without going ape-shit." He looked at me curiously. "You mean, am I ever planning to tell her?"

"I was just thinking," I told him, "about what Boo said to me --"

Johnny smiled, but there was no warmth in it. "You can tell him you delivered the message, if he ever asks again. All right? You just say you delivered the message to me."

19. Enrique

Finding the house on Alta was the easy part. Getting the Mole across the lawn was trickier. The houses north of Montana Avenue cost millions of dollars apiece. The styles range from glass-and-steel boxes to cottages that should have Hansel and Gretel ringing the doorbell. There are haciendas, with red tile roofs over pink stucco trimmed in blue. You'll see a California Craftsman next door to something from the Black Forest. The older houses are more modest, standing quietly since before the land was worth so much, though some have been enlarged with add-ons that make them look hunchbacked. Developers like to advertise interior square feet, so the new houses look cramped and uncomfortable on their lots, with two-story columns of ivory out front and windows that would fit a house of worship. They sit side by side like elephants, warning off poachers with blue-diamond signs that threaten *Armed Response*. Private security cars cruise these streets, past front lawns divided by flowers and flagstones marking out a path from the public sidewalk to the wood-and-iron front doors.

The Mole sat with me and Johnny in the grass on the sidewalk, in the shade of a coral tree. That's the state tree of California -- an unimpressive choice, if you ask me, since they could have chosen a redwood or sequoia, something old and grand. The coral is a small tree with splashy orange flowers. A row of them runs up the middle divider along San Vicente, marking the border of close-packed homes in the north-of-Montana district. Joggers stumble back and forth in their shade, gasping in the fumes from the Boulevard. The particular coral tree over our heads had a plastic swing in it. The Suarez family had a

little boy who might still have fit the swing, but it didn't look as if anyone had used it for a while.

Johnny sat on a gnarled root with his back against the trunk, pulling up clumps of damp grass and tossing them into the swing. A loamy smell clung to their roots. "So? There's the doorbell."

Its button gleamed golden on a dark oak frame.

"It's Sunday morning at nine o'clock. All you got to do is walk over there, go ding-a-ling, and say, 'If you people are headed for church, I'd sure appreciate it if you let me tag along with you.'"

The Mole looked over the sidewalk as if were a river to be crossed. On the far bank, a green prairie led to the house, a hundred paces away. Priscilla's window might be right overhead. And yet from where we sat, it might as well have been twenty thousand leagues across the sea.

The Mole sighed and sank back. "I'll just sit for a while."

"Have a good time," said Johnny. He had promised Annabel Lee he would lead the Mole here, when she threatened to do it herself. But he hadn't promised to sit with him until the Westec cops chased them off the block. Johnny stood up and turned to me. "You want to stay, mooning with Romeo? Or you want to see a ball game?"

"What ball game?"

"Little League. At Memorial Park, on Fourteenth Street. Just so the trip won't be a total waste."

I like watching Little League. Some of the kids aren't bad at pitching and hitting, and can even handle the infield. But I like watching the parents, especially those fathers

who stand with their fingers in the links of the fence, hollering things that are supposed to be encouraging. You should see the faces they make at the umpires. The coaches tell the kids it's for the fun of the game, but if you notice who goes in and who sits on the bench, inning after inning -- it's not so much fun for everybody.

The Mole said, "I'm okay by myself."

That was good enough for me.

Johnny and I headed one block west to Fourteenth Street and then South to the park, which runs from Colorado to Olympic and east to Sixteenth Street. On the corner of the two-block square is a lumber company, then a dog run, and then the park proper. As we passed the dog run, Johnny stuck a foot in the fence and hoisted himself over the hedge, so he could see inside. He dropped down a minute later and didn't say anything, so I didn't say anything either.

Memorial Park has a parking lot and a brick house with basketball courts inside. There's a playground built in the sand, with swings and monkey bars and a rocket ship that kids can climb forty feet in the air. It also has three or four outdoor fields for sports. On the north edge are the tennis courts, next to the dog run. Then comes a field that runs from Fourteenth to Sixteenth Streets, with backstops at opposite ends. You see grown men playing soccer, or girls playing softball, or anything in between. On the south side of the park are two smaller baseball fields with bleachers and scoreboards. The minor league teams play on the western field. It's smaller than the eastern field, with a humble, wooden structure behind home plate. Downstairs is a closet for storing the bases, and upstairs is a room for the dad who works the scoreboard. Most of the time that's empty.

The eastern field is where the Little League's "majors" play. Its concession stand sells peanuts and other ballpark stuff. Johnny and I bought a bag of sunflower seeds to share. A cop was sitting in the first row of the bleachers, so Johnny and I found two seats on the top row of the bleachers around the corner. A walking path ran underneath and behind our seats, right down the middle of the park. If we looked between the boards, we could see the heads of people down there, between the concession stand and the bathrooms. Unfortunately, if they looked up, they could see us, too.

Thump! I felt something hit the bottom of our bench. Twice.

"Hey, *Puto*! Is that you?"

"Ríque, look -- your friend. Senor Boone's Farm."

Looking down between my feet I saw a certain blue bandana that I had not seen since the night we found the Mole.

"Maybe he like to see the scar he made."

"Holy shit!" I whispered. "You know who's down there?"

But Johnny was already on his feet, running on the bleacher. The people sitting there didn't appreciate being bounced, but Johnny wasn't paying them no never-mind. When he reached the end, Miguelito was waiting, so he couldn't jump off. Instead, he hopped down the tiers, stepping on the benches between people's butts, while that whale of a *cholo* kept pace with him in the dirt.

"What's your hurry, *puto*? We been looking for you."

There was a boy on the bottom bench, who might have played catcher a couple of years before. Johnny snatched a bag of peanuts out of his hands. The kid said, "Hey!" but Johnny started shooting nuts at Miguelito like a peanut machine gun.

"You best stop, *lambiche*, if you know what's good for you!" Miguelito threw up a hand to block the barrage and ducked under the bleachers.

That's when Johnny made his move, leaping over the *cholo*, headed for the open space of the park.

Miguelito stood up, too big and slow to catch him. "Ríque! Lookit! You gonna let him get away with that shit?"

Johnny tore down the path as far as the bathrooms, which are in a squat concrete structure near the minor league field. If he had kept running, he might have made it out. But he stopped when he heard what the *cholo* said and turned around to see how much distance was between them. That gave Ríque the second he needed to slam into Johnny's knees. Johnny pitched forward, trying to get his footing, but toppled back with Ríque's weight on top of him. Johnny fought his way out from underneath the *cholo*, but Ríque's two *compañeros* caught up, breathlessly, and Johnny had nowhere to run. They stood him up against the bricks, and Cuete Clavo waved his twenty-two. They dragged Johnny into the men's room, and I knew I had to do something.

I didn't relish the idea of running in after them. They would probably stab Johnny if it looked like he had company, and then turn their attention on me. On the street, what you do in that situation is head in the opposite direction. Too bad about the kid inside the bathroom, but his bones are his problem and your bones are yours. But they had *Johnny* inside, so the rules didn't apply. I was on my own, survival-wise. A one-man rescue was suicide, unarmed, and there was no time to go for friends to help. All I had was a stupid idea.

I ran down the far side of the bleachers, around the backstop behind home plate, to the bleachers on Sixteenth Street. We had seen a cop there, hadn't we? Their job was to protect people when they needed it, and Johnny sure needed it now. The police don't usually see their job as protecting *us*, of course, but I figured the cop didn't have to know who he was protecting until after he went and protected him. Except, when I got there, he was gone. There was a beefy guy sitting where the cop had been sitting, wearing one of those white shirts with long blue sleeves ball players wear under their uniform shirts. This guy must have worn it a long time ago, because I doubted if any uniform would still button across the gut hanging over his belt loops.

"Where's the cop?" I asked.

The beefy guy looked over at the vacant space beside him. "Who?"

"The police officer who was sitting here."

He squinted at me. It made me realize I was probably dirtier than anyone else at the game, and from the way his nose wrinkled there was a chance I smelled worse than most of them too. He said, "*You're* looking for a cop?"

At that moment Johnny was in the men's room, propped against a wall between the urinals. There was only one stall, and its door was shut. Ríque stood in front of him with a homeboy on either side holding Johnny's arms, while Ríque talked tough.

"You know, don't you? You know who I am."

"No," said Johnny. "Who?"

Ríque reached up and smoothed back a lock of straight black hair.

Johnny must have flinched, because Cuete Clavo laughed.

Miguelito elbowed Ríque. "*Ése*, you gonna let him talk to you like that?"

Ríque hit Johnny in the face. "Remember me now?"

Johnny couldn't get a hand free to wipe off the blood dribbling down his mouth. He tasted it with his tongue. "Oh, yeah," he said, "I remember, now. You gave me a nickel bag to blow me in the park."

Ríque grabbed him by the throat. "You're the cocksucker, *puto*."

Johnny croaked his answer. "I'm not the one with my hands all over you."

Ríque hit him again, with his knuckles, in the belly.

"*Chúpame, puto*."

That one hurt. Johnny doubled over, but the *cholos* held him, so he had to gasp it out upright. His stomach tried to lurch up his windpipe, and his lungs began to spasm. All he could do was suck in lumps of oxygen and keep from spewing sunflower seeds. Ríque brought his face really close to Johnny's.

"Now take a good look, *gabacho*. You remember me, *pendejo*, or don't you?"

Johnny nodded, and Ríque smiled. "*Si*. We're getting somewhere."

That's when Johnny spit in his face.

It wasn't a good idea. Ríque grabbed Johnny's shoulders and brought them down until his knee hit Johnny in the chest. His homeboys let go. Johnny fell, and they both kicked him on the ground. He would have been a mess by the time they finished having fun, but at that moment someone in the stall flushed the toilet. The three of them looked over, annoyed, when the door of the stall swung open and a uniformed cop had to bend his head to fit through the doorframe. It was the one we had seen sitting on the bleachers. His gun was in its holster but his nightstick was already swinging into position.

"What are you kids doing in here?"

The smart move for Johnny would have been to stay with the cop, but you can't change a lifetime in a single beating. Enrique and his *compas* were out of there like jackrabbits, and Johnny followed after them as soon as his legs stopped wobbling. The cop could have taken a look at him, or called an ambulance, but like a lot of adults he must have figured it was better to let the kids work things out themselves. I was fifteen feet away on the softball field, when Ríque and his homeboys ran out. A few minutes later I saw Johnny, and then the cop, tucking his nightstick into his belt. While he was in sight, the gangbangers stayed away from Johnny. But as soon as the cop turned away, heading for the concession stand, the three *cholos* went after him again. But Johnny was already on his way.

It was amazing how fast he could run, after taking that beating. I headed straight across the big field, aiming for the northwest corner. That was the way we came, and if there was anything I could do to help, it would be at the exit. I didn't see what I could do to help Johnny exactly and didn't want them coming after me. But sometimes you have to take a chance. If they saw me running, they wouldn't be able to tell if I was on my way to a soccer game on the northwest field.

Ríque was the fastest of the three. He lit out after Johnny through the center of the park, past the minor league field, the basketball court, and the parking lot. The other two kept after them, but they didn't have the wind or determination. Johnny and Ríque both reached Fourteenth Street before me and ran along the edge of the park. As they approached the corner, Johnny looked spent. He had longer legs and a better stride, but how long could he keep filling his lungs when every muscle hurt? I was out of breath myself and no one had beaten me yet.

A similar thought must have entered his head, because he cut right, and I knew he was in trouble. He was headed for the lumberyard, where Ríque couldn't touch him, but how was he going to get out? With all the loose nuts and bolts, they wouldn't let him stay for long -- and guess who would be waiting? But Johnny surprised me again. He didn't enter the lumberyard. He hopped the chain link fence into the dog run squeezed between the parking lot and the park.

It was a trap, plain and simple. Once inside the dog run, there was no escape out the back and nowhere else for Johnny to run. Ríque understood that and stopped running. He hung for a second on the fence, catching his breath, then opened the gate of the dog run. He started to smile again, and made little kissing noises, as if he was calling his dog. But it wasn't any dog he was calling. He moved slowly into the dog run, occupying the center, so that Johnny couldn't run past him.

"C'mon, *puto*. *Aquí estoy*. You're gonna get it now."

But Johnny wasn't running, either. He was standing a third of the way into the dog run, one hand on the fence, breathing hard. He was trying not to show it, but I could see that his left side hurt -- his ribs. His eyes stayed on Ríque, who kept coming closer, making those kissing noises. There weren't any people or animals at the front of the run. Halfway down, an old timer was sitting on a bench, who looked up as Ríque advanced. He didn't like the idea of anybody talking to a dog the way Ríque was talking to Johnny, but all he did was cradle his poodle in his arm.

At the far end of the dog run were two bigger dogs, sniffing each other while their owners stood on opposite sides, avoiding each other's eyes. One of those dogs looked over, and his standing ears twitched.

"I'm tired of this bullshit," Ríque said when he was close enough to whisper and Johnny had to hear him. "This is where we finish it."

Ríque took a step forward, but Johnny didn't step back. I didn't know if he could. But he looked up as if he was the one running out of patience. "If I were you, I would turn around now and get the hell out of here."

Ríque laughed at him. "But you're not me, *lambiche*."

Johnny took a breath in stages. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

"I won't," Ríque said. He picked up a stick some dog-owner had left in the dirt. "And in just a few minutes, you won't be able to say nothing else to nobody."

He edged toward Johnny -- paused to enjoy the moment -- and rushed forward with his stick in the air. But in the last second before he reached Johnny, something flew by the edge of my vision. It was a huge, black-and-brown mass. I heard the roar we're going to hear on Judgment Day, when the Beast is loosed from his chains. Ríque stopped moving forward -- his hand came down -- and he started floating backward with both arms flapping behind him like wings beating the air. But he had no place to go any more and no way to get there. Ríque landed on his back in the brown dirt with an enormous monster on top of him.

"Drago!" someone was screaming from the far end of the dog run, jogging toward us as fast as his Reeboks could carry him. He grabbed the beast by its studded collar and hauled him off Ríque, whose face looked raw as hamburger. But his fear was still strong enough to lift him from the dirt and propel him through the gate at the end of the dog run, just as his *compadres* were arriving. Miguelito and Cuete Clavo took one look at Ríque's face, and the direction he was running, and took off on his heels.

Drago kept howling and lunging after them through the fence, held back only by his master, who clung to his leash with both hands and repeated in a reasonable voice, "No, boy! Drago -- I said, 'No!'"

I wasn't sure the dog got the message.

Johnny was making a horrible noise that might have been a laugh when it started inside him. "Hey, Francis," he said, trying to use the fence to raise himself to his feet. His knees wouldn't hold him, and his voice sounded like it had hissed up through a crack in the hard-packed ground.

The man restraining the monster noticed him for the first time.

"Johnny?"

"Looking good, right?"

The dog trotted over to sniff him. Johnny let go of the fence to pet Drago's head and collapsed in a heap in the dirt.

20. Emergency

Uncle Francis dropped off Drago at the Marina and drove Johnny to the emergency room at Santa Monica Hospital. While we sat waiting for a nurse, he insisted on calling the police about the incident. Johnny told him it was too late for the police to do anything about it, but Francis said, "It's not too late for them to prevent it from happening again."

Johnny and I knew that it *was* too late for that, but Uncle Francis couldn't wait in his seat without doing something, so he went off to make his call.

Johnny didn't want any part of it, but all he did was complain, bad-mouthing the hospital, his uncle, and the police, so I knew he was in bad shape. If he were in better shape, he would have walked right out of there. Johnny sat back against a yellow chair as if his spine was welded to the plastic. He didn't even feel like making fun of the people around us with infected toes and busted lips. I don't like hospitals, because all the people inside are either sick or dying from a knife wound or accident. I don't like the smell of whatever they use on the floor and the instruments to clean them from one patient to the next. And I don't like the way they take your blood whenever you stop by. I know it's dangerous out on the streets. I don't need a needle in my arm just to make some clucking nurse feel she's done what she could to protect me from sex and shared syringes.

But I didn't feel that way about the hospital this time. In the emergency room's waiting area, there's enough pain and anxiety to quiet people down, so that muggies who wouldn't wait two seconds for a free meal in Palisades Park sit patiently on those chairs, waiting for somebody to stitch them up and tell them they're going to live. I couldn't see anything wrong with Johnny except a few bumps and scratches, but Uncle Francis kept

talking about bleeding to death from internal injuries until Johnny and I wondered if there wasn't actually something to be afraid of. When he came back from the phone, he said, "That's that," with grim satisfaction, as if he had just taken care of violence on the streets. Johnny rolled his head against the plastic and groaned.

The police officer showed up after they had taken Johnny from the waiting area, where he waited again lying on a bed behind a curtain. That left Uncle Francis and me together, and I didn't have a lot to say. He kept looking at me as if I had something to do with getting Johnny beat up, and there was no way to explain what had happened under the pier on the night we found the Mole. So I sat and smiled at him, while he made awful faces and shook his head to convey the idea that he couldn't imagine why Johnny and I lived the way we did. I couldn't answer for Johnny, but if Uncle Francis had offered me the couch in his condo, I would have slept on it every night for a year without asking for a blanket.

The police officer turned out to be a woman. That made two surprises at once. I didn't know that police officers would come if you called them. She introduced herself as Officer Torwald, and Francis spent most of the interview trying to learn her first name. *Bridget*, it turned out, which she finally told him if he promised he would pay attention to the questions she was asking, instead of the badge on her chest. She had a blonde bun with blue eyes, maybe five foot nine in her jackboots. She was everything Uncle Francis wasn't, and it cast a spell that left him powerless.

"What is your relationship to the victim?" she asked Francis, trying to make her voice as impersonal as possible.

"Legal guardian," Francis replied with a straight face. Because she was a woman, I guessed, and he wanted to show her he was a responsible role model and not a creepy dog-owner with an unwanted nephew.

But he didn't fool her, because she kept glancing over at me and wrinkling her button nose. If Francis was his legal guardian, how come he let Johnny hang out with the likes of me? That wasn't so *responsible*, was it? I got up and went for a walk, to give Uncle Francis a fighting chance.

Unfortunately for him, I couldn't get very far. The waiting area wasn't big, and they only let doctors go back where the action was. They must have thought that the kind of people who would be waiting for emergency medical help didn't need to stretch their legs. You can bleed to death just as easily sitting in one spot. They had a sliding window at one end of the room, with a nurse behind it whose hair looked like it was cut with a bone-saw. *No-nonsense* was probably how she thought about it, but I thought she could have used a little nonsense. There was a man standing in front of her window, waiting for her to look up. He was dressed in a mustard-color jacket, tan pants and brown loafers with pennies in them. He had a lumpy nose that he pressed to one side to clear as he sniffled through the other nostril. Then he pressed it to the other side and tried to breathe the opposite way. Each nostril made a different snuffling sound.

"Would you mind checking again?" he asked the nurse behind the counter.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Yermer," she replied, without glancing up from her keyboard, "but we're busy today. And there are people waiting ahead of you."

"I'm not here to see a doctor."

Then she did look up. "I thought you did want to see a doctor."

"I want to *see* one, but not to be treated by one. Look," he took a folded piece of paper out of his jacket pocket, "I received a call yesterday from someone sitting at your desk, who told me that a little girl came in here with an upper respiratory infection. That nurse recognized her from this family photograph."

A square Polaroid snapshot.

The nurse peeked over at it, and her expression shifted. She was listening now, you could tell. I started edging toward them casually.

"She was diagnosed with bronchitis," the man said. "The resident who saw her wanted to admit her, but her sister said they had to be home or their father would punish them. The resident wasn't so sure they had a home to go to." He pressed the Polaroid against the window, where it stuck to the glass. "Dr. Binaca told me she doesn't look like this any more."

"Baraka," said the nurse.

"He described to me the girl he treated, and I went home and made a few changes on my computer. Now I need to know how close it is."

He stuck another picture to the glass, alongside the Polaroid. It was a color print of a quiet little red-headed girl.

The nurse sighed as if she were being asked to carve the face into Mt. Rushmore. She looked behind her, into a room where emergency care was being given, and turned back to the man with the pennies in his shoes. "Dr. Baraka is busy inside. But I was on duty yesterday, too." She reached around the side of the sliding window and peeled the photo from the glass. She studied it in both hands.

"That's her."

"Thank you," said Mr. Penny Loafers.

"You're welcome," the nurse replied, handing it back and resuming her typing. That was all she had to say.

The man looked at me. I had sidled in against the glass close enough to catch a peek when the nurse gave the picture back to him. I was going to ask how long it was going to take before Johnny came out again. But the picture chased the question right out of my mind. It was Tiffany, all right. A good likeness, sharper than the Polaroid shot -- with corn rows.

* * *

When Johnny came out, he found Francis trying to chat earnestly with Officer Bridget Torwald, who wasn't giving him the time of day. She had bigger muscles than he did, and practically moved him out of her way to get to Johnny, who for once looked to her like a victim, instead of a perpetrator. They had stitched up a cut on his eyebrow, and through his open shirt I could see white tape wrapped around his lowest couple of ribs. Officer Bridget probably expected to get a little cooperation out of him, or even gratitude. But if she did, she didn't know Johnny Doe.

"You were attacked by members of a Latino gang? Is that right?" She had her memo pad open, pencil poised.

"I don't think that's right," said Johnny. "Do you?"

She seemed to lose her place. "I mean, did it really happen?"

"Oh," Johnny said. "I suppose."

Francis gave Office Bridget an encouraging nod, although she didn't look too encouraged by it. "Did you happen to catch any names?"

Johnny shook his head.

"None of them talked to each other? Or weren't you listening?"

"Not while they were beating me."

"Were they wearing any particular colors? Insignias?"

"No."

She gave him a doubtful look. "Then how do you know they were a gang?"

"You said they were a gang. I just supposed."

She closed her memo pad. "Were they wearing baseball uniforms?"

He shook his head. "No --"

"Then they couldn't have been a baseball team, could they?"

Francis tried to save the interview. "He couldn't get a good look at them. Johnny was running away, so they were all behind him most of the time."

"You ran away?" Officer Torwald asked Johnny. The way she asked the question made her sound amused, as if the courageous choice would have been to fight.

"Fast as I could," said Johnny.

Torwald wrote out a long final note, stuck the memo pad back into her belt, and gave Johnny a hard stare. "We'll get right on it."

They were done. Uncle Francis wanted to take Johnny home, but Johnny wasn't in the mood for that, either. He said, "I'll stop by later."

Francis didn't let it go. "When?"

"After."

"After what?"

"After I'm done with what I have to do first."

"You mean, never."

"Not never. Some time. That's why they call it *Later*."

Francis laid his hand on Johnny's shoulder. "Come with me now. You're in no condition to go back out on the street."

"You can't make me," Johnny said, shaking off Francis's hand. Then, because Officer Torwald was still in the emergency room, talking to Mr. Yermer and the nurse at the desk, Johnny added, "You can't make me stay, at least. What are you going to do, lock me in the condo and keep watch to make sure I don't slip out the back door? Stay in the house all day, just to make sure I do too?"

"I could."

"No, you couldn't. For one day, maybe. But tomorrow is Monday. Won't you have to go to work? What are you planning to do? Put a padlock on both doors, leaving me no place else to take it out except on Drago?"

Francis was pretty cool through the first part, but at the sound of his dog's name, he started to get hot under the collar. "You wouldn't do anything to Drago."

"Wouldn't I?"

"What has that dog ever done to you?"

"Bite me. Bark at me."

"He barked but he never bit you. Not that I saw."

"Not while you were around."

"I don't believe it. I don't. He just rescued you from a gang!"

“They wouldn’t have hurt me like he did. I still have tooth marks in my arm.”

Francis pushed up Johnny's sleeve. “Nothing there.”

“They must have faded by now.”

"That's not true. You're defaming a good animal. *Slandering* him. That's so unfair, John, to a decent creature and loyal friend. I can't believe you would say a thing like that about Drago."

But Francis didn't try to stop us when we left. He offered to give us a ride, even, though Johnny suspected it was to find out where we lived, and we had to keep the Crib a secret. I was tempted to remind him about Boo's visit, but his ribs hurt when he walked, and I didn't want to add to his misery any more than I had to.

When we got back to the Crib, Annabel Lee took one look at him and went into her mother hen routine, ordering him into the cot and cooking up a can of soup over a sterno fire. She asked Johnny what happened, but all he would say was he ran into some friends who were still carrying a grudge. She turned to me with her hands on her hips, and then even Johnny didn't try to stop me from telling the whole story. The Mole sat on the floor and listened, and I knew what he was thinking -- that Johnny took his beating, only postponed. But Johnny didn't like anybody holding that idea, so he said to the Mole, "It had nothing to do with you. I owed him some money and forgot about it."

The Mole nodded but didn't believe him.

I had to tell the story again when Nicky came in with Tiff, but the reaction was entirely different. She shook her head sympathetically to the whole first part, but when I got to the emergency room, and remembered the pictures of Tiffany at the desk behind the sliding window, Nicole interrupted.

"The guy at the counter? Tell me what he looked like."

So I described Mr. Yermer again, trying harder to remember him, and this time came up with pennies in his loafers. That made the Mole laugh, but Nicky's lips pressed together as if she were trying to store every detail in her memory cells. I told her about his mustard jacket and tan pants, grayish eyes, and the way he poked himself in the nose, trying to breathe. She repeated every item, and I wished I noticed more.

"All right," she said, when I couldn't remember anything else, "thank you, Moses, for the warning. Now I know what I have to do."

"We," said Annabel Lee. "What *we* have to do."

"What?" Johnny never liked it when Annabel Lee said *We*.

"Tiff and I need to go now," said Nicole. "It's been a couple of weeks already. They must have searched every place they could think of, including the bus station here and the one in Tulsa. I don't have all the money for our carfare yet, but I'll get it. I will. Because we need it now."

"How much?" asked Annabel Lee. "How much do you still need?"

Nicole went under the table for her backpack. "Round trip bus fare from here to Tulsa is one hundred five dollars and twenty-five cents a ticket," she said. "We'll need two tickets, so that's two hundred ten fifty, in fare. The trip takes two days, and we've got to eat on the way, so even if we eat two meals a day, and figure five dollars a meal for the both of us, that's still another twenty, at least." She found the paper she was looking for and showed it to Annabel Lee. "Aunt Emily lives outside Tulsa, so we have to find some way to get there, too."

"Couldn't you call her from the Tulsa Greyhound station?"

Nicole made a face. "I don't know how happy she'll be to see us at all. I'd rather make our case up close and personal, than over the phone from Tulsa, when she has to get in a car and pick us up. Maybe she doesn't own a car or it's in the shop. It's too easy to tell us that we shouldn't have come. That we shouldn't have run away, and the only responsible thing to do is call my Mom in Los Angeles."

"Okay," said Annabel Lee. "So how much are we up to?"

"Two hundred ten fifty for the tickets plus twenty at least for food along the way and another -- maybe twenty to get out there?"

Johnny whistled silently. "That's more than two hundred fifty dollars."

"I know," said Nicky.

"How much do you have already?" asked Annabel Lee.

"Sixty-eight dollars and twelve cents," said Nicole, without adding up the bills and change she had tucked away in her pack. She probably took it out and totaled it up every night, after Tiffany went to sleep.

"So how much are you short?" asked Johnny.

"A hundred eighty-two dollars and thirty-eight cents," said the Mole.

Annabel Lee whistled this time, out loud. "That's a lot."

Nicole checked out Tiffany, who looked afraid. "Don't worry," Nicky told her. "We'll get it, one way or another."

Johnny and Annabel Lee exchanged a glance and I knew what they were thinking: he was one way, and she was the other.

21. Joshua

Nicole refused to allow Tiffany on the Promenade, once she knew Emil Yermer had enhanced a photo showing Tiff as she was, in corn rows. "What do I gain, if I make a few extra dollars and lose my sister?" she asked Annabel Lee. A hundred eighty dollars seemed to me a lot of wood to chop. I thought she stood a better chance of raising that pile with Tiffany than without her -- but nobody was asking. To me and the Mole fell our usual job of keeping Tiff out of trouble, while Nicky played her flute on the Promenade. Annabel Lee went with her. Johnny didn't want to come to the beach, which was the only place the Mole and I thought might entertain her, since we couldn't go to the Pier or the movies, or any place there were lots of people.

Nicole didn't want us taking Tiff to the beach, but we couldn't keep her locked up in the Crib day and night. For one thing, if we stayed inside all day, anyone passing by might hear us making noise, and that could give away our hideout. For another, we could all go bonkers. Besides, the sun would dry out her hacking cough, which didn't sound like it was getting any better. In the end, Annabel Lee convinced Nicole that Tiff should be all right if we took her to a beach where nobody else went -- like that was easy to do. It might have been a Monday, but it was still the summertime, when the beaches in Santa Monica fill up with people from all over town. We walked north into Pacific Palisades, where the beach runs along the Pacific Coast Highway all the way to Malibu.

We found an empty stretch of beach near a storm drain, which ran under the sand from the highway embankment to a rocky spur sticking out into the Pacific Ocean. In some places you could see the drain, and in other places you couldn't, but the locals know where

the pipes are buried and all the best spots to lay out their blankets. The drain we found had only two or three blankets nearby. We tramped down a wooden staircase from the highway, over a hillside covered in weedy foliage. Between the slats underfoot we could see the blue steel of a drainpipe winking through the ground cover. At the bottom, where the sand began, a woman in a skimpy black bikini slept on a striped towel, while beside her a toddler dozed in his stroller, shaded by an awning. Twenty feet closer to the waterline, an old-timer read a newspaper in a lawn chair. Under his chair he had a cell phone, a water bottle, and a book that must have been five hundred pages thick. I had to admire any reader who brought an entire newspaper to the beach and then another five hundred pages, in case he got bored.

There were also a couple of German tourists out on the rocks. He was skinny as a beanpole, with thin hair and a red scalp, wearing the tiniest bathing suit over his privates. His girlfriend was dressed for another climate zone in a sweater and stretch pants, with a camera around her neck. The idea was for him to stand on top of the rocks striking poses like Mr. America, while she went further out on the rocks and took his picture against a backdrop of the Pacific Coast Highway. He kept calling for her to snap him. "Hannah!" He'd strike a pose. "Ja, Gerhard," she cried, as if they were the first people in the history of California to hit on that idea.

The Mole was happy on the beach, since it had sun, sun, sun without even the possibility of shade. I never appreciated that. As soon as I cross the sand and sit down,

I start to get thirsty, and if I bring a water bottle, I gulp it down until I have to take a wicked piss. That's when you notice how far the bathroom is. You either have to put on

shoes and get them filled with sand, or walk across a furnace with your bare tootsies. I'm not exactly what you call a beach bum.

We didn't even have a good blanket. The Mole and I were lying on the sand in our clothes, with only our shoes and socks off, watching Tiffany play down where the sand is brown from the tide. It seemed to relax her cough, somewhat. Words like *riptide* and *undertow* were floating through my mind, when the Mole turned to me and asked, "How many times do you think the waves come in, over a year?"

Did I care? The Mole obviously did, and I saw nothing else to care about more, so I guessed, "A hundred million?"

"No," he said. "Really. How many times?"

Tiffany was picking up shells, but not only shells -- long trails of seaweed, gooey bulbs, and hardscrabble from the ocean floor. Behind her, Gerhard was having trouble keeping his balance on the rocks.

"How many?"

The Mole didn't reveal the number, right off. He was saving it for a big finish. He said, "I've been counting, and a wave comes in around once every ten seconds. That works out to six waves a minute."

I nodded, watching the surf. "I had no idea."

But he was just getting started. "Figure twelve waves every two minutes, or thirty times twelve every hour. Three-sixty. Twenty-four times three-sixty is --"

He calculated. I waited.

"Eight thousand, six hundred forty waves rolling in, each and every day, day after day. That's three million, one hundred fifty-three thousand, six hundred waves a year. Crashing onto this beach, then pulling out again."

I had to admire the ocean. "You'd think they'd get tired of it."

"That's just a single year," he said. "You know how many years it's been since the waves first started? Neither do I. But it's been a lot of them."

Tiffany had been calling us all along, waving and shrieking whenever she found something new among the garbage dragged in by the tide. But the sound of her voice changed suddenly, and when I looked up, I noticed she had given up searching for shells. She was hollering, pointing toward the rocks, where the German tourist had gone nuts. He was twirling both arms over his head, like a giant propeller with two blades. He was swearing at Tiffany, or a woman running on the far side of the rocks, wearing a bikini top and a towel that flapped around her knees. I heard her shout, "Where is he?"

"Come on," I said. But the Mole was already on his feet.

We crossed the sand fast, without our shoes. We crashed through a wall of noise made by the waves and heard three people screaming. Tiffany was calling our names and waving us back. The German tourist on the rocks wasn't swearing at her. His attention was fixed on the woman in a bikini, his arm stretched in a line toward the shore. Behind him, his girlfriend was hollering in German, which I couldn't make out over the noise. The woman in the bikini didn't speak German either, but she heard the girl screaming and that was all she needed. Clutching her towel around her legs like a slit skirt, she started climbing up the rocks. The man on top kept shaking his head and pointing all five fingers straight back toward the shore.

"Joshua!" The woman shrieked as she climbed. "Hold on, honey! I'm coming!" The German on the rocks gave up trying to tell her whatever it was and helped her to the top. The Mole and I didn't wait, but scrambled up around her, past the German tourist, heading for his girlfriend's voice. As soon as we were high enough, we could see where she was standing -- about ten feet from the edge of the spar, where the storm drain ended. The rocks tapered off into the ocean, but the blue steel pipe jutted out, tall as I was and equally wide across its circular mouth. Hannah was crouched in front of it, concentrating on something inside. We edged around the pipe, with our backs to the ocean, and saw what the commotion was about.

A thick steel mesh had been welded across the pipe-mouth, to prevent anybody from venturing inside. The mesh was welded to the lead all around, covered with residue from the tide. How many times a day did the Mole say the ocean swept into and out of the thing? Millions. And every time, it carried some microscopic organism that stuck to the pipe, until a blue crust grew over the welding that could have withstood a typhoon. The mesh was made of steel bars that crisscrossed each other, leaving square inch spaces wide enough for water to pour through, but not for anything bigger than a minnow. An aluminum can was trapped inside the mesh. It had entered the pipe somewhere higher up the line but was too big to slip through the grid. I didn't mind one less can polluting the ocean. But there was also a little boy standing inside the pipe-mouth, gripping the bars in his fingers, crying.

His face was red as a raisin, and he was bawling at the top of his lungs. Gerhard led the boy's mother across the rocks, until she lost her grip and stumbled twice in the last dozen steps. When she saw Joshua, her hands went up and she nearly fell off the rocks.

She lunged forward, sinking her hands into the steel mesh grid to catch her balance. For a minute, I thought she might tear the thing off the pipe-mouth. It happens sometimes, when a mother finds herself in a state of terror, facing the death of her child. The woman in the bikini tried. But it was steel crusted with marine life and wouldn't budge. The seawater was grabbing my ankles, tugging at them on its way out again. I felt a chill start at my feet and spread through my body all the way to my head -- because the tide was coming in.

The surf washed halfway up my calves, about a foot above the level of the rocks. It caught the boy inside the pipe by his thighs. The water rushed towards him, and where the grate broke it up, the foam struck him near the waist. He was clinging to the mesh, not because he expected it to let him out, but because he needed to hold onto it in order to stay on his feet.

You might think that nothing could draw your attention away from such a sight, but something drew mine. Tiffany was climbing up the rocky spar, slipping on moss and sliding into crevices between the broken stones. Somehow in our rush to help we forgot her on the beach, and she followed us. I looked around for the Mole, but he was nowhere in sight. I waved at Tiffany, trying to get her to climb down by shouting, "Get back!" But she couldn't hear me over the waves, or else didn't care to hear me, and kept coming closer, until I had to carry her over the last gap in the rocks, where the ocean was spilling in between us. I held her hand to keep her upright beside me. "We have to go back," I told her. "It's not safe here."

She hollered, "What about the boy?"

What about him? I wanted to say. His mother was screaming, tearing at the grid, and the German was back on top of the rocks, waving his arms madly over his head, as if

he thought he might bring down some low-flying planes. I guess he was trying to signal somebody higher up the beach, a lifeguard who could get the heavy equipment needed to break the grate off the mouth of a drainage pipe. But the tide was pouring in too quickly for that. In minutes the water would be high enough to rip the boy's fingers off the inside of the mesh and carry him up the pipe into a hole in the earth.

“Climb back,” I ordered Tiffany.

But she wouldn't move. She wasn't even coughing. She just looked at the ocean. “How did he get in there?”

I had no idea. A memory began to tickle the back of my head and I looked across the beach to the wooden steps, where we first came down the hillside from the highway. Below us, the mother had been sleeping, while between our feet --

I heard something go *bang*. Inside the pipe. I thought it was the noise of the boy, echoing along the steel. But it sounded too regular, *thump thump thump*, moving from higher up the pipe. I thought, *The kid is totally screwed now*, and decided to get Tiffany away, before she saw it happen. Or we were swept off the rocks by the incoming tide and carried out to sea ourselves.

“We gotta go back,” I said. “You're sick, Tiff, aren't you?”

“I'm fine,” she told me, shivering.

“Uh huh. Let's go. If the tide doesn't kill me, your sister will.”

That was an idea Tiffany understood, and she finally turned toward the beach. But at the last moment, she stopped and looked around and put her hand on my arm. “Where's the Mole?”

He was nowhere in sight.

The last place I saw him was the mouth of the pipe, when we both realized there was no way to pry the mesh off. My eyes went from the trapped boy to Tiffany. But where did the Mole go? For help? I thought I saw someone running toward the highway, but was it him? Tiffany wouldn't let me lead her back to the beach, and when I picked her off the rocks and carried her, she began to fight against me. Punching me. I couldn't make out what she was saying while the tide crashed in, but when it sizzled out again --

She was screaming, "I hear him!"

I thought she meant the boy. Then I realized I *didn't* hear him, for the first time since crawling out on the rocks. He must have gone under. A wave had slammed in with his name on it, knocked him down and roared over him, sucking him up in its undertow. I wanted Tiff back on the beach. But again she fought against me, until I heard what she must have heard already, echoing off the inside walls of the pipe: a calm voice that didn't come from the boy.

"All right, Josh," the voice boomed.

There was something familiar about it, like a voice you hear in your dreams.

"You're going to be all right now," the voice said again.

It was even more familiar than that.

"We've got ten seconds."

"Let me go!" Tiffany kicked me. I stumbled, and as she scrambled back over the rocks to the mouth of the pipe, it finally hit me. I *knew* that voice. I climbed back after Tiffany, but at that point I would have gone anyway, because I had to make sure, one way or the other. If what I thought was wrong, it was somebody else's tragedy. But if what I thought was right, it could have been my last chance to say good-bye.

There was an awful scene at the mouth of the drainage pipe. The woman in the bikini was gripping the steel mesh, staring wide-eyed at her son on the other side. But the boy was no longer on the ground, where the seawater swirled around a pair of knees that seemed frail as reeds. The Mole was inside the mesh, holding the boy up with his right hand while he gripped the grate with his left. The water poured in, rose to his waist, and was sucked out to sea. In between tides, the rest of us gathered at the pipe mouth. The boy's mother lost her towel in the last wave but still clung to the mesh, on her knees, unwilling to let go. Tiffany slipped past her and stood in front of the Mole, looking up. He saw her and relaxed his grip on the grate.

"Can you pass him out to us?" Tiffany asked the Mole.

He looked around the inside rim of the pipe mouth. "No way, Tiff."

The boy's mother wailed. Maybe she was trying to say his name. I couldn't tell.

But what could I say to her, anyway? Tiffany put her hand on the woman's bare arm, but she shook it off as if it were an octopus.

Gerhard cried out, "Hannah!" and I saw why. His girlfriend had climbed to the end of the spar and was standing on a rock that a moment before had been under water. She slipped, caught her balance, and raised her camera. Tiffany turned toward her, and Hannah snapped a picture. Then she climbed past us, holding up the camera. We heard the surf building behind us.

"You better climb back up on the rocks," the Mole told Tiffany. To me he said, "Get her back to the beach, will you?"

"I'm trying!"

"Where are you going, Mole?" asked Tiffany.

He peered into the pipe behind him. "That way, I guess."

The boy's mother pressed her face against the mesh and her eyes went even wider when she gazed down the long drainage pipe. "No!" she cried, in a whisper. "You can't! It's pitch dark in there. Please don't make him die in the dark!"

I felt the waves creeping round my ankles.

The Mole looked at her, then turned and stared into the blackness behind him. "Lady, you don't know what dark is."

He gave Tiffany a timid smile, but as he turned away his face chilled me to the bone. He took the boy's small hand and led him into the pipe. In a moment the shadows closed around them.

The boy's mother screamed, "Josh-u --!"

But her cry was cut short when Tiffany grabbed the back of her hair and pulled hard. It must have been the last thing the woman expected. Her head sailed back, cutting off her windpipe. Her eyes rolled off the drainpipe and fastened on Tiffany, who stood face to face with her, upside down.

"Lady," said Tiff, in an uncanny imitation of the Mole, "it's time for us to go now. Or else we're gonna drown."

The woman tried to shake Tiffany fingers out of her hair. When she let go of the mesh, I grabbed the woman's upper arm and dragged her to her feet. She was in shock, stumbling as she rose, but didn't put up much resistance. Tiffany and I coaxed her along the rocks, one of us pushing and the other pulling her out of the foam. She was every ounce as heavy as she looked. Once I had to lift her by her armpits, as the waves swirled around my knees and Tiffany's hips.

I kept telling Tiffany to go ahead, but she would only do it if the woman was safe. That helped too. It gave the woman a way to save somebody, even if it wasn't Joshua. She could save Tiffany by getting herself to the beach. So she helped a little at the end, cutting her knee as she scrambled over the rocks. But as soon as she slid down the last stone slope and touched the sand, she looked back at the rocky spar. It was entirely under water -- and a howl came out of her I still hear in my dreams.

By that time, people on the beach noticed something was wrong. There were people running towards us with blankets, trying to comfort Joshua's mother. I had to get Tiffany away, before people starting paying attention, asking how we felt and how to contact our parents. Tiffany wouldn't leave without the Mole, and I didn't want to either. So we hung around, ducking grown-up sympathy, until something on the beach drew everybody else away from us.

It was where the sand meets the hillside, under the wooden ladder. The toddler's stroller was ten feet away. The old-timer with the cell phone was the first on the scene. He heard a shriek and saw something white crawling out of the ground cover. It was pale and flopped around until it caught some plants that grew over the drainpipe.

Joshua's left hand and arm.

His head came out next, sideways, squeezing through a crack that didn't look big enough for a squirrel.

The upper third of the drainpipe curved out of the sand, under the foliage. The crack ran along a shadow of the ground cover. It looked too narrow for a toddler's head. From inside the pipe, there was no way Joshua could have reached that crack himself -- he

had to be lifted from below. He oozed out of it, popped up, and skidded into the sand. He sat there, bawling, until people started running from every direction.

What they saw next was even weirder: the Mole climbing out through the crack in the drainpipe like a rubber spider-boy. It was a bit wider on top, so that's how he came. One arm. Another. The second arm dropped inside again. The head appeared sideways. The narrow shoulders squeezed out, then the second arm. The upper torso, a twist, and finally the hips. By the time he lifted his legs out, and sat on top of the pipe, it was like a magic trick. The crowd clapped, while the Mole blinked in the sunlight, trying to figure out where they came from and what they expected him to do.

A lifeguard's orange truck was parked at the side of the highway, and a police car rolled beside it, leading an ambulance. The paramedics rushed down the steps, carrying a stretcher. But Joshua's mother had him by then and wouldn't let him out of her arms. So they put the Mole on their stretcher and carried him back upstairs, while an officer guided Joshua's mom up the steps after them. She got into the back seat of the patrol car. They loaded the Mole into the ambulance and shut the doors behind him -- and that was the last time we saw him for a while.

22. Spider-Boy

The next day the Metro section of the Los Angeles Times ran a photograph of the Mole standing inside the wire mesh of the drainpipe with Joshua cradled in one arm, and the town went ga-ga over him. Its caption read, *Spider Boy rescues toddler* in boldface, and then went on to identify the Mole as *fifteen-year-old Henry Zachariah of New York City*, so our boy must have told them something. The story that went with it called him a *street urchin* and *orphan*, which are kind words, coming from a newspaper. When they don't like you, they call you a *reputed gang member* or an *alleged drug dealer*. The legal politeness guarantees that anyone thinking of giving you a break will think again, harder. Standing bravely inside a drainpipe with a kid in his arms, a street urchin becomes a hero. By the next morning, half the City Council of Santa Monica had paid a visit to Henry's room on the fourth floor of Saint John's Hospital to snap their pictures with the amazing Spider Boy.

"Why'd you do it?" one reporter asked.

Young Henry aw-shucked. "I didn't have time to think about it, one way or the other. People helped me when I needed it, so I helped him."

Perfect, said her face into the camera.

The social service agencies weren't far behind. By Tuesday morning at eleven o'clock, the family services unit at St. John's had received twenty-seven offers to adopt Young Henry, and the enthusiasm had a spill-over effect, so that seven other kids were adopted in Santa Monica on the rebound. The local news stations came by to tape a segment, and one station even asked to restage the whole thing, using a contract toddler.

His doctors wouldn't allow that idea, but the Mole went along with most of them, smiling for the cameras or looking brave, whatever they wanted.

You might wonder what he got out of it. The Mole had a bed for a few nights, and those hospital beds are really comfortable, with push-button controls that lift up your head, or your feet, or both. The Mole showed it to us when we visited him. They gave him three squares a day, plus a snack, and nailed a television set to the wall over his bed. They wanted to put Joshua on the other side of the curtain in the same room, but his mom saw no reason to keep him there overnight. She could observe him just as well at home. But the Mole had no one who objected to his staying over, and the hospital didn't seem to mind the attention from the press. A man in a grey suit came into his room and told the Mole not to worry about the bills. He was a civic hero, and the municipality owed him its gratitude. Until then the bill hadn't even occurred to the Mole. But from that point on, he ate whatever they brought him on a tray.

Johnny advised the Mole to give them the slip and come back to the Crib as soon as he could. But it didn't look to me as if Young Henry would take that advice to heart. Among those twenty-seven offers of adoption were a handful of very sweet deals. Young Henry was welcome to join a family of three -- mother, father, and junior -- who lived in a house on Adelaide on the north side of the street, with a spectacular view of the canyon. Those houses cling to the side of the hill. You drive off of Adelaide onto the roof, and then pick your way down the hillside steps to the rooms down below. These people had a terrace outside their bedroom that hung over the Santa Monica Canyon. But Spider Boy turned them down, choosing instead to move from his hospital room into the second floor of a house at Eleventh and Marguerita.

“North of Montana,” said Johnny, “and five blocks away from her royal highness, the Princess Priscilla.”

The Mole had chosen to go with Warren and Evelyn Prescott. They offered him his own room with a bed and two pillows. They promised him a bicycle, a hockey stick, a baseball glove, and the latest model Wii. That was supposed to be the closer. But their talk about schools really turned the tide. Evy Prescott told him he could go to Samohi, if he had friends there, but if he didn't, she preferred a Private School. The Mole had never been to Santa Monica or any other high school, and hardly expected to find us enrolled in the fall. But when Evy started comparing Private Schools, and said, “Harvard Westlake or Crossroads,” a bell went off in the Mole's subterranean memory. He had heard that word, *Crossroads*, on Sunday morning, when the Suarez clan had come out of their house and climbed into the Explorer for their journey to church. They hadn't noticed him, of course, in the shade of a tree at the foot of their lawn, but the Mole had listened and learned. And now he was going to Crossroads.

It took him three days to spot her.

What got in the way was the Mole's celebrity. The other students either huddled around him or stayed away, and Priscilla was not in the crowd who wanted to know what it felt like to risk your life for someone you didn't even know. Or live on the streets, or be a hero. He told them he didn't have enough time to think, that day he rescued Joshua. Living on the streets made you feel hungry and afraid most of the time; and being a hero felt weird, because he'd never been a hero before, and didn't want to again. That wasn't what they hoped to hear, because they all drifted back to their own classes, and the Mole had a chance to find Priscilla without half the school gossiping about it.

She was out in the yard with a few girlfriends, playing Horse with a basketball. The game was, each girl had to make the same shot the girl before her had made, or she picked up another letter, starting with “H.” The first one to spell out the whole word, Horse, was the loser, and the one who had the least letters spelled won the game. That’s what one girl told him, who was waiting on the sideline of the basketball court for her own turn to play. Three girls were on the court at the time: Priscilla, wearing shorts and a jersey in turquoise and blue, like they give to girls who play soccer; a tall girl named LuElla Johns; and Elizabeth Nofzinger, Priscilla’s best friend. They spent ninety percent of their time together, according to the girl on the sidelines. The other ten percent they spent asleep, dreaming of one another.

The Mole watched for a while, as Elizabeth tried to make LuElla’s shots, and Priscilla followed Elizabeth. Priscilla’s hair was long and loose, and it swung away from her when she ran. The Mole enjoyed watching that, but then he noticed a strange thing. LuElla was clearly the best shooter on the basketball court. But she wasn’t winning. She was three letters ahead of Elizabeth, true, with an *H* to Liz’s *H-O-R-S*. But Priscilla still hadn’t earned any letters at all. How was that possible?

It didn’t take long to figure out, once you noticed. Priscilla played ruthlessly, setting up one difficult shot after another for LuElla to imitate. But she didn’t have much of a challenge herself. Liz could have been an awful player, unable to make any but the easiest shots. But she made a few fine baskets in the challenging shots LuElla left her. So why was she setting up swishers for Priscilla? Was Priss aware that Liz was cheating for her? Or was she innocently doing her best?

She knew.

There was no way for the Mole to escape that conclusion. Once, because she couldn't always control her shot, Elizabeth left Priscilla a tough act to follow and Priss got angry at her. What was she angry about? Liz's attempt to beat her? But she was trying her hardest to beat LuElla, wasn't she? And LuElla was trying to beat Liz. The Mole swung his eyes over and saw that LuElla noticed, too. They were double-teaming her. Her teeth clenched and the sweat dripped off her nose as she tried to beat both of them. She was a beautiful shooter and flew after the rebounds, but two-against-one are awful odds on a basketball court. When she missed her final jump shot, LuElla snagged the rebound and slammed the basketball against the handball wall.

"Sore loser," Liz called, though she had lost too.

"Next!" cried out Priscilla, while she and Liz remained on the court.

The girl on the sidelines walked away with a nasty look at Priss. "I'm not going to play in a cheater's game."

"Big loss," said Elizabeth, and the two of them laughed.

But nobody else wanted to play. Priscilla looked around, and no one met her gaze. Elizabeth giggled and said something behind her hand, and Priscilla looked over his way. Then she bounced the basketball at Henry.

"Spider Boy," she called out, as he missed the pass and went to pick it up again.

"You wanna play with us?"

"I don't know how," said the Mole.

"You just have to spell the word *Horse*, silly."

"I don't spell so well," he said.

"Well -- we can always play five-three-one. You can add, can't you?"

“Uh huh.”

“All right, then. You get five points for a foul shot, from the free-throw line. Three points for a basket, where it bounces. And one for a basket from wherever you like on the court. Understand?”

“Sure,” he told her, though the Mole had never made a basket in his life.

“Pass it,” she said. “I’ll shoot first.”

She missed the free throw, but called, “Unfair,” and took it over again, without explaining herself. The second time, it sank. She took two steps forward, until she stood directly in front of the basket. From that spot she reached for the ball as it fell through the net. Her back foot swung round and touched the ground in front of her, steadying her. But she put it back behind her and took the shot from two feet in front of the basket. It bounced off the rim. She didn’t try that one again, but made her last shot from the side of the basket, *swish!*

Prissy shrugged. “Six zip. Your free throw.”

He stood at the line as she had, weighing the ball and the distance to the square above the basket on the backboard. It was angles and nothing else, the Mole told himself. He ought to be able to play the angles. He raised the ball on one palm, just as Priscilla had done. He closed one eye, aimed, closed the other, and pushed off with his free hand. *Swoosh!* It arced through the air and came down six inches before the rim.

“Air ball! Air ball!” cried Liz.

Priscilla's expression was more forgiving. He expected her to say, “*Why don’t you try that again?*”

Instead she said, “You’d better get your rebound, hadn’t you?”

The ball had bounced under the basket and rolled. By the time he caught it, the ball had rolled halfway across the yard. He stood there, looking across another entire basketball court. With the ball in his hands he called over, "Can't I shoot from the edge of our court? I'll never make it from there, either, but I might not hurt anybody."

"Shoot," said Priscilla.

He hooked the ball overhand and sent it sailing into the fence along Twenty-first Street. When he ran to get it, there was a man standing on the other side of the fence, in a mustard jacket. The Mole bent over, and the man said through the links, "You're Henry Zacharias, aren't you? The one in the paper?"

"Maybe. Who are you?"

"A friend," said the man in the mustard coat. "Emil Yermer is my name. I'll give you ten dollars if you tell me something."

"What?" said the Mole. He didn't like the way the guy pretended they were buds, but ten dollars was still ten dollars. "I don't know much."

Yermer showed him a copy of the L.A. Times with his picture on the first page of the Metro section. "That's you, isn't it?"

"Uh huh." This was going to be easier than he thought.

"And who's this in the foreground?"

He was pointing at Tiffany.

The Mole's scalp tingled in the back. "I dunno."

"Don't you?"

"Never saw her before in my life."

"Not even on the beach?"

He hesitated. She had to be on the beach, since she showed up in the photograph. What had Moses been thinking, letting her into that photograph? A lot was going on at the time, and no one expected Hannah to risk her neck on a slippery rock for the sake of a black-and-white photograph. But she must have known what she was up to, because her photo was in the L.A. Times. The question was, which answer would help Tiffany?

"I never noticed her," said the Mole.

"Didn't you talk to her?"

"No."

"The photographer says you did."

"I might have."

"But you didn't notice her?"

"Right."

"I see. Well, here you go." He stuck a bill through the fence.

"What's that?"

"The ten dollars I promised you."

"I don't want it."

"It's on your side of the fence." He left it in the link.

The Mole tried to shove it through, but Yermer put up his hand and the crumpled bill dropped inside the yard. "You might not think you earned it -- but you did."

* * *

Esther Jackson had left the streets with the help of the Angel to Angel Shelter, on a side street near Michigan Avenue. The address of the place was confidential, so that abusive boyfriends couldn't find your kids, once you worked up the courage to run away. Esther had been careful not to have any kids before she wanted them, and tried to get Marcus to do his part. She came into the shelter when she was thrown out of her mother-in-law's apartment, one night when he didn't come home. They used to do some things together, but that wasn't her fault. He didn't do them for Esther's sake. And the proof of that was, after she had gone, he kept right on getting high.

She didn't. That was both because she had no money and because she saw what it might turn her into. But when she knocked that first night, all the beds were taken up. Still, they fixed up a couch for her, downstairs in the TV room, and promised her a bed as soon as one opened up. Other ladies wanted it, but the woman at the desk when she first came in, Mrs. Sarah Washington, looked out for her. Esther repaid her kindness over the next seven years to other women seeking shelter in the night. Now Esther had her own section-eight apartment and a job covering the desk on the graveyard shift, when she tried to look out for the women in the house as Sarah had looked out for her.

That's why, when the call came from Mr. Yermer, she wrote down what he asked for on the yellow pad they kept next to the phone. *Anybody who knew the Spider Boy in the paper, Henry Zacharias.* It was an odd request, because most of the time they were looking for kids on the street, when nobody knew where they were. This boy was in the hospital, where anyone could find him. Mr. Yermer had explained he was looking for somebody this Spider Boy knew, who was still out on the streets. He let it sound as if he was doing a special favor for Young Henry.

There was money in it, too.

All of the women in the house needed money desperately, so when Esther heard the new one in Number Four talking after dinner in the TV room, she went to the phone and found Mr. Yermer's number. He hadn't answered the night before, but this morning, in the last hour of her shift, he had returned the call, asking for Esther Jackson by name. She had left her name in the message on his answering machine. She told him that far as she knew, Number Four wasn't up yet that morning. But she could call him as soon as Number Four showed her face downstairs. Mr. Yermer preferred to come right over and wait himself. Esther told him they didn't usually let men into the shelter, except police. But since he had been referred to the shelter by Officer Bridget, she supposed she could make an exception in his case. He said *Thank you*, he would run right over, and, *Yes, that reward money was still available.*

When he got there, he gave Esther a twenty-dollar bill, before he even found out whether Number Four really knew the Spider Boy. That was for making the call, he said, and wanted her to keep it for herself. Esther clipped it inside her dress, under the collar, where she could think about it later. Mr. Yermer had a fifty for the woman in Number Four, and another for the shelter, if he didn't run out of time. Esther asked what he meant by *run out of time*. He could only wait half an hour, he said, and would have to speak to Number Four another day. Unless he found somebody else who knew the Spider Boy, before he made it back to the shelter.

Esther watched the top of the stairs and listened for noises.

When another fifteen minutes had passed, Mr. Yermer stood, buttoned his jacket, and thanked Esther for her help.

“Wait,” she said, “five minutes. I know Number Four will want to talk to you. And I know she knows who she said she knows.”

Mr. Yermer consulted his wristwatch. “I’m sorry,” he said, jangling the change in his pocket. “But time’s a-wasting. And time is money.”

“Let’s wake her,” Esther decided.

“We couldn’t do that, Ms. Jackson. Number Four needs her sleep.”

“She needs fifty dollars more. Just a second,” she said, heading up. “I’ll have her downstairs in no time.”

But Mr. Yermer must not have understood, because he followed Esther upstairs, treading carefully on the green rug so as not to disturb the floorboards. Esther didn’t want to send him back down, because she wasn’t sure he would stop before he reached the door. She knocked on the door of Number Four and called through the whitewashed wood, “Good morning, Miss! It’s Mrs. Jackson, from the desk. Are you decent?”

No answer.

She tried again. “Miss? Are you all right?”

Still no answer. It could mean nothing or could mean something, Mrs. Jackson knew. So she opened the door. “Look alive! We’re coming in -- ”

Inside was a tiny, bright room with a slanting roof, a bed and a dresser, and chintz curtains over the window. A black garbage bag full of clothes still stood in one corner. The curtains weren’t keeping out the morning, but the woman in bed lay twisted up in the blankets. Her slender arms poked from a white cotton nightgown, crushing the pillow down over her head.

“Are you up?” asked Esther cheerfully.

“No,” came a gravelly voice.

“There’s a man here to see you,” she tried again. Something stirred in the sheets and blankets. Mrs. Jackson whispered, “He has some money for you.”

The pillow lifted. “What kind of money?”

“Tomorrow’s bottle,” said Yermer.

Esther didn’t like the sound of that at all. She liked even less when he sat down on the edge of the mattress. “Mr. Yermer,” she said, “this is a private bedroom in a woman’s shelter --“

“Tell me about the Spider Boy,” he told the blanket, as he tucked a tightly rolled fifty-dollar bill under his thigh.

The pillow shifted, and a hand passed over the sheet between them, smoothing it down. Bette sat up, frail against the headboard. Her eyes fluttered to rest on the fifty. “What do you want to know?”

23. Arthur Richter

No good deed goes unpunished -- that's the word on the streets. It might not have seemed that way at first for the Mole, but you can't predict the consequences of any act, or who will have to pay the piper, when he finally comes around with the bill. We all had to pay it, as it turned out. But Nicky paid more than her fair share.

This is the way it happened.

Nicole, Tiffany and I were walking north through Palisades Park, heading back from the Pier to the Crib. Nicky wouldn't let Tiff near the Promenade, but no matter how hard she played her flute, she couldn't raise the money they needed alone. Between a rock and a hard place, she decided to bring Tiff along when she played for the crowds -- but only to the Pier, where they were less likely to run into anyone adult who might know her mom and step-dad. But something had changed in Tiffany's appeal. Her eyes might have become too red-rimmed or her cough too alarming. People weren't responding to her charm by digging into their pockets. Just when they needed to take off for Tulsa, two hundred and fifty dollars became impossible to get.

Tiff was bundled in the sweater Angela had given Annabel Lee when she went to their house for the flute. But she was shivering anyway, and we had to stop every block and a half for Nicky to rub her sister's hands between her own chapped palms. I missed the Mole, who usually kept me company while the sisters were busy together. Besides, his absence hurt the act. People didn't enjoy watching anybody drop a bean bag without somebody else around who could actually juggle them.

We were passing through the rose garden, when Tiffany stopped to smell a bud. Her nose was nearly as red as the petals, and when she straightened, she shivered. She was wearing a skirt, and you could see her knees shaking.

“I’m cold,” she told her sister.

Nicole felt her forehead. “We’ll be back at the Crib in a few minutes. Can you make it that long?”

“Uh huh.” Tiff was holding herself around the elbows.

It bothered me, because it was only five o’clock on a summer day, and the sun was overhead. I was walking around in my T-shirt and didn’t need a sweater. What was she going to feel when the weather turned chilly? Or at ten o’clock that night? I had gotten used to hearing her cough through the night -- well, you can’t really get used to hearing a little girl cough, without being able to help her. But I didn’t want to add to her problems with mine.

I thought that Tiff needed to go back to the emergency room. But Nicky wouldn’t hear of it. Hadn’t I told them about a private detective posting a picture of Tiffany there, with corn rows? I suggested that Nicky could cut her sister’s hair again, but it only made her mad. What difference would that make? They recognized her once already with her new hair cut, didn’t they? So what was going to stop the doctors from spotting her again? Didn’t I ever hear myself, when I said these things?

Sure I did -- but I also heard her coughing all night long.

We walked until we reached the place where Palisades Park narrows. Two roads come together, where San Vicente runs west into Ocean Avenue, north and south. The park has to give way to make room for the intersection. When we trudged by on that day,

the passenger door swung open on a car at the curb: a black CTS, a sporty little Caddy, parked between two deep-blue vans. Their paint jobs should have made me suspicious. But I was thinking about the Mole, and about the emergency room, and I only looked up when we heard the woman's voice, full of emotion.

“Tiffany? Nicole?”

She was sitting alone in the back seat of the CTS, in a charcoal skirt suit that made her practically invisible against the leather. Her hair was cut short, reddish brown, parted down the middle and straight to her shoulders, where it curved up stylishly. There was someone in the front seat too, behind the wheel, but he wasn't dressed as well, in a pink polo shirt with short-sleeves and a collar.

“Mom?” cried Tiffany.

“Oh, shit!” Nicky reached for her sister's elbow, but before she could snag her, Tiffany was already out of arm's length, halfway to the car.

Nicky took two steps backward, but it was too late. From the van in front of the CTS two men in pink polo shirts jumped out, with golfball logos stitched into the fabric over their hearts. They were followed by Emil Yermer, in a mustard jacket and clashing green pants. Nicole turned toward Inspiration Point but her escape was cut off in that direction, when two men climbed out of the blue van parked behind the Cadillac. One of them was wearing a polo shirt, but the other was dressed in a tailored suit, in the same charcoal gray as Tiffany's mother.

“Nicole,” he said softly, in a voice that suggested disappointment and patience and judgment too. “Isn't it time this was over, already? Have you any idea what you've done to your mother?”

“What I’ve done?” screamed Nicky, but you could see already how it would go, her hysteria no match for his serenity.

The two pink polo shirts were closing in behind her, but Nicky stood motionless, face to face with Arthur Richter.

I got a good look at him. He was blond, with blue eyes and sunken cheeks and that moustache-and-chin-beard combination. His shirt was gray with a white razor stripe; his tie was red and black like briquettes when you're waiting for them to start a barbecue. His belt had a silver buckle, and his feet wore cowboy boots with rattlesnake diamonds. I remembered Nicky saying he came from east Texas.

“Leave us alone!” she hollered at the polo squad. But no one slowed on account of it, and Tiffany was already in the back seat of the CTS.

“We couldn’t do that, Nick,” her step-father said, “even if we thought it was best for you. Don’t you realize how sick your sister is?”

Nicky edged away from him. “Do you realize how sick you are?”

His eyelids flickered. “Now, you know better --”

A pink polo shirt made a grab for Nicky’s right arm. But she side-stepped him and ducked his partner, like a dancer evading partners. But they came together, closing off retreat to the south. To Nicky's west lay the concrete fence and a sheer drop down the face of the bluffs. To her east was the traffic on Ocean Avenue. Her only chance was north, where the Crib lay waiting, surrounded by barbed wire, with a six-foot hole inside that could have swallowed up her step-father. But to reach it, she had to get past him. Nicky felt a heavy tread behind her and knew she had no time to consider the unfairness of her choices. She sprang forward, head down, going for her step-father.

She expected to hit him in the stomach or to force him out of her way. He did a little of both. He took a step to the left but reached out to his right, like a bullfighter with a cape. He moved so close to the moment of contact that Nicole had no time to change directions. When she reached him, he caught her by her shoulders, swung her completely around, and wrapped her into his arms.

“I’ve missed you,” he whispered into her hair, too softly for anyone else to hear. She felt his saliva on her neck, his breath against her ear.

Her skin crawled. “Bastard!”

“Daughter,” he replied, holding her closer against his chest. She couldn’t breathe, couldn’t speak, couldn’t scream, as he dragged and carried her into the van.

* * *

They didn’t give me any thought at all.

After they were gone, I felt like a fool for standing there, watching them snatch Nicky and Tiff off the street. The CTS had never shut off its engine but sat at the curb, purring in idle through the whole thing. And even while they cranked the engines of the vans and pulled out after the Caddy, I stood rooted to the spot, unable to do anything or even to cry out for help. Who was there to cry to? Johnny might have tried to stop them, but what would have happened to him, if he did? They would have beaten him to a pulp, with no Drago to come to his rescue. We had lost the Mole and Nicky and Tiff, and there was nothing for me to do but go back to the Crib and share the bad news.

Neither Johnny nor Annabel Lee was there when I crawled under the chain link fence to the Crib. I was ready to climb through the window to open the door inside, but it swung on its hinges when I tugged at the knob, alarming me. Had something else gone wrong while we were away? I thought of Boo. But there was no one waiting inside, and fifteen minutes later Johnny and Annabel Lee came through the doorway together.

I've already described how it made me feel, listening to them murmur and giggle and breathe in the night. But I cannot tell how it felt, watching them come in together, trying to solve a problem for somebody else when they had so much to solve themselves. I knew what I had to tell them. It was nothing else but trust in them that let me begin -- that and a question from Annabel Lee.

She crossed the threshold still telling Johnny, "but you've got to remember, we haven't asked everyone yet. People will surprise you. Somebody you've written off as a total sponge will come across, with a debt you don't remember lending."

"Happens all the time."

"You could go to Francis with something like this."

"Ask his help in keeping two little girls from going home to their mum?"

"You don't have to put it that way."

"All right. How?"

"You could say you just need the money. It's your money, isn't it?"

"Uh huh. From my folks."

"Then how can he keep it from you, legally?"

"By doing it. He says it's all waiting for me, when I come back to live with him. He calls it my college fund."

She made a face. "I wish I had one of those."

"Take mine."

"If we could get our hands on yours, I would. For Nicky and Tiff." She paused.

"Where are they, Moses?"

"Home," I said quietly.

"What? I didn't see them outside. Is Tiffany belly sick again?"

"They went home," I said again, to Johnny.

He caught the sound of my voice. "Where? When?"

I told them the story as quickly as I could, though my voice broke a few times, especially when it came to my part, standing around doing nothing. "I'm sorry. I didn't know what to do, so I just watched and let it happen. My brain went numb. I couldn't think who to ask for help that might have given any."

I was trying not to cry, but it came in buckets. Annabel Lee reached over and put her hand on my arm, while her other hand went to Johnny for support.

"It wasn't your fault, Moses."

What else could she tell me at a time like that?

"It wasn't. It was as much mine and Johnny's for not being here to help."

Johnny's face said, *Not as much*, but Annabel Lee insisted.

"We failed them," she said, "because we couldn't give them enough when they really needed it. Nicole told us that the clock was ticking, but did we take her seriously? No, we didn't. Did we pool all our money to put them on a bus? No -- we put aside a little, but ate and drank up most of it, figuring we would have as long as we needed to get the rest."

Johnny opened his mouth, but she cut him off.

"Nicky never stopped working at those tickets to Tulsa. If we stuck with her and kept at it, they could have been on a bus before anybody traced them. We failed them, Moses. All of us."

That didn't make me feel the least bit better, but it did make Johnny feel worse. "It's not too late, is it?"

We both looked at him. Annabel Lee asked, "What do you mean?"

"They still send buses to Tulsa, don't they?"

"Yes, but Nicole and Tiffany --"

"Are maybe fifteen minutes away from here, in Brentwood."

She looked at me. "Could we get to them?"

I didn't see how. Their parents might cut Tiff a little slack, but for Nicky they would throw away the key. We couldn't put Tiffany on a bus alone, could we? Not to mention the two hundred fifty dollars, none of which we had but eighteen fifty-seven.

"We could get it," said Johnny.

"If you're willing to ask your Uncle Francis."

"If I have to."

"I might even be able to ask --" She stopped, and looked at Johnny, whose face said, *What are you thinking?* But she went on deliberately. "--as a loan, which we would pay back little by little. After all I did for him, it's the least he owes me."

"Oh, yeah. Gratitude goes a long way with Mr. Boo."

"You don't know him as I do."

"That's nothing for you to be proud of."

“He has a human side, you know. You just have to reach it.” She turned my way, expecting me to agree that everybody does.

I shook my head. “From what I saw, you better leave him out of it.”

Annabel Lee looked at me. “From what you saw? Where?”

“Right here,” I said, turning to Johnny.

His eyes were dark as the moon.

Annabel Lee stared, and his jaw unclenched. Her eyes slid over to me. “Moses? What did you mean, *Right here?*”

“I meant, imagining him when I go to sleep. From what I’ve heard.”

“You’re lying,” she said.

“No --”

“Now you’re lying again,” she told me.

Johnny saved me from having to lie to her a third time.

“Boo was here,” he said.

Her face paled and her cheeks fell in. “Here in the Crib? When?”

“A couple of weeks ago,” he said. “You were at school.”

“And you didn’t tell me?”

“Not right away.”

“Not ever! He knows where I live?”

She looked from him to me as if we had kept from her the results of an H.I.V. test that hadn’t come back negative.

Johnny didn’t answer her, so Annabel Lee repeated, “He knows just where I am? And you didn’t think to mention it? Not for a couple of weeks?”

“I didn’t want to scare you,” Johnny said.

“Oh, well, this is better, isn’t it? Now that I really have something to fear!”

“He can’t hurt you any more.”

“Can’t he? Who’s going to stop him? You? And Moses? Or maybe the Mole?”

“All of us,” I told her.

She stared, looking right through me. “You don’t understand, Moses,” she said, when she noticed me again. “You don’t know Boo.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Then you’re crazier than he is.” She swung her eyes to Johnny. They grew wider as she held them there and filled up with tears. “You’d do it, too, wouldn’t you? You’d call him out. For my sake.”

He didn’t answer.

“Well, I don’t need protection, thank you. Boo wouldn’t kill me! Not when he can still get so many hours out of me!”

She grabbed the pillowcase with her things inside it and turned toward the door. Johnny planted his body in her path. She took a step to her left, to walk around him, but he stepped to his right, cutting her off again.

“Let me go,” she said.

“Where?”

“Back to work. It’s been a fun vacation, Johnny, but nothing lasts forever. Nicky and Tiff are back on the homestead. School is almost out. It’s time for me to go back where I belong. In Hollywood.”

“Forget it.”

She sat down on the cot. “I can wait you out.”

“Fine,” he said. “You do that.”

And taking hold of my arm, he led me out of the Crib, closing the door behind us. I heard Annabel Lee stamping around inside, slamming her pillowcase into the walls. The cot went over in a jangle of springs. She hollered, “Asshole!” like a million times. A while later I heard her crying, sobbing and sniffing as she tried to bring it under control. Johnny and I sat in the dirt with our backs to the door of the Crib, listening to the noises inside. He didn’t say much to me, and I had nothing to say to him, so we just sat without talking, each of us keeping an eye on the window.

When the sniffing pretty much ended, Johnny stood up. He wiped off the seat of his pants and studied the door. “I’m going in,” he said, like a pilot in the South Pacific. He listened and so did I, but all we heard were cot springs and a low, moaning cry. “That went better than I expected. Don’t you think?”

I didn’t know what he expected. “Too bad about Nicky and Tiff.”

“Yeah,” Johnny said. “I knew she’d take it hard.”

“When they caught them?”

He nodded. Then his eyes narrowed into slits. “But I mean to save them, Moses, one way or another. I never did before, but now I actually do. You can believe that or not, whichever you want.” He knocked on the door and waited until he heard a whimper. It could have been *Scram* as easily as *Come in*, but Johnny went inside.

I didn’t see any reason not to believe him.

24. Sergeant Blackthorn

Johnny tried to make good on his pledge. At night, when Annabel Lee was breathing heavily enough for her snores to overtake her whimpers, he climbed off the cot and stepped over me, as he made his way to the door. Once he left me a note in his big, block handwriting: *KEEP AN EYE ON HER*. Other times he must have assumed I would do that anyway. He closed the door so quietly you hardly heard it click.

He headed down to the stroll south of Pico Boulevard on Ocean Avenue. It was already cold in the mornings, so he had to keep moving, to keep the blood circulating. Johnny stood on the curb in front of the Lobster Box, where the pier meets the mainland, with his motorcycle jacket open and both his hands stuck down the front of his cut-offs. Cars stopped, but he waved them on until he saw one he wanted. Best was a Lexus, he told me, with a ring on the driver's left hand. The Lexus has a killer sound system, with a CD-changer. Its driver has money to pay you and lots more to lose. Johnny was young and pretty on the streets of Bay City and knew what he needed to survive.

Johnny had a routine that protected him, in case he picked up an undercover cop. "There's some action on the stroll tonight!" he would say, one hand outside the window, tapping the roof with his fingertips. "It's a buyer's market -- enough beef walking around to cut yourself a steer, for what? Forty dollars a head?"

It was corny, but it got the message across, and you couldn't be sure to nail him for solicitation. The John might say, *Sounds good to me*, or maybe haggle over the price. Either way, Johnny would nod, like he was still thinking it over, and say, "Let's see the rope you're packing, Cowboy."

If the John unzipped, exposing himself to a minor, Johnny knew he wasn't a cop. He would take the guy's cock in his hand and give it a friendly tug. "Come along, li'l dogie," Johnny would sing, like a perverted Roy Rogers. Then he would start to go down on him. The John might watch for a minute, but sooner or later he would always settle back on the Lexus head cushion and close his eyes in bliss. When he opened them again, he found a cold straight razor under his balls.

That wrinkled him up like the paper sleeve of a straw.

Johnny would say, "You know, I'm not really in the mood tonight, and guessing by your pardner here, I'd say you're not, either. Why don't you just give me the money we talked about, and we'll call it a night?"

What were the Johns thinking in that minute? Probably how much they wanted to kill the little punk. But then, there were other considerations. If they hesitated, Johnny would give them a nick. It's amazing how clarifying the sight of your blood can be. You start to think what's really worth what to you. Yeah, if Johnny cut them, he would most probably be sent away for a *loooong* time. But all kids are stupid, even the smartest ones, and he might one day regret what he had done, while the John would be going around without his balls. It wasn't a good bet, to take the chance. Some of them might have told themselves they'd find him, later, and beat the living crap out of him. But really what everybody wanted was never to see his face again. What had it cost them? Forty dollars? They were planning to fork that cash over anyway. Johnny wasn't about to tell anybody, and if he chose the Lexus correctly, neither were they.

Johnny would do this two or three times a night, earning forty dollars a pop. It was important to him that he made it back to the Crib before Annabel Lee woke up in the morning. Usually he succeeded, but once he came in to find her sitting up on the cot.

"Where were you?"

"I had to go to the crapper," he said. "Jeezus."

She gave him a funny look but believed what she chose to believe. He kept the money hidden from her, in a tin can full of nuts and bolts and rusty metal parts, where he figured the women would never look.

* * *

We didn't know what was happening to Nicky and Tiff. I went by their place a couple of times, but you can't learn a lot from standing outside. They never even came to the window. The Westec guys in their patrol cars didn't like the looks of me and moved me off as often as they found me loitering on the lawn across the street.

Afterwards, we heard the whole story.

When they first hustled the girls off to Brentwood, Tiffany erupted in a coughing fit that nearly brought up a lung. They took her to Daniel Freeman Hospital in Marina del Rey, where an X-ray showed she was suffering from pleurisy. That's an infection of the sack around the lungs, one step up from pneumonia. The doctor hospitalized her for a few days, to ensure that she got the rest she would need to recover. Perhaps the doc had heard enough of the story to know how much stress was waiting for her at home. Perhaps he had some beds to fill. Either way, Tiffany went straight into the hospital.

The three days of her sister's stay gave Nicky some breathing time. In front of her mother, she accused her step-dad of sexual abuse. She said he crept into her sick room when she stayed home from school. He had a hook in the middle of his bedroom ceiling and a whip made of rattlesnake leather with an ivory handle and ebony tip. There were no scars on her, because he was careful and knew how to use his toys without leaving any bruises. But the scars on her soul!

Arthur Richter lifted an eyebrow and Joanne knew what that meant: her husband was reminding her for the hundredth time that she needed to take a stronger hand with the children. *Is this how they repay me?* his arched eyebrow said, for providing a roof over their heads, and paying their school tuition, and the thousand and one other things Joanne had placed on his mighty earning shoulders. There was indeed a hook in his bedroom's ceiling, supporting a chandelier. They never discussed the possibility that the chandelier might be removed from the hook and set aside for a time.

When Nicky told her story to the Brentwood police, Arthur brought in a lawyer who suggested she had never recovered from the death of her father; her boundaries were confused and her judgment unstable. The girl had stolen her sister from the safety of their home and nearly killed her on the streets. Had Mr. and Mrs. Richter not found their younger daughter in time to rush her to a hospital ...

He left the rest hanging.

What did he mean, confused? Sergeant Blackthorn had inquired of the attorney. The Sergeant had listened to Nicole's story, when she had called and asked him out to the Richter house. He had written up the complaint and discussed it with a psychologist on

call for the department. But he felt it only right to call her father too and invite him down to the station, to hear both sides of the story.

Mr. Richter's attorney confided that discretion was necessary but they had reason to believe that poor Nicole had been desperate enough on the streets to seek a love that dared not speak its name. The sergeant did not catch his drift, so the lawyer spelled it out plainly. The experience had made her a lesbian, whose hostility to Arthur Richter was a particular case of a general hostility toward men. They could bring in expert witnesses, if they had to -- the girl would need a good therapist. But her mother and father preferred that the whole thing be kept under wraps for the sake of her future, even if Nicky couldn't understand the reason for it yet. They were a pair of teenage girls, while Arthur Richter was a professional, homeowner, and contributing member of the community, whose wife sat squarely beside him.

They *looked* like a normal couple.

The Sergeant might have bought it or not, but either way, Nicole didn't have one shred of proof, and there were no marks on her body. Tiffany was still in the hospital. Nicky had tried to be a thoughtful mother, but she was a lesbo who hated men and hated Arthur Richter especially for taking her father's place. There were all sorts of Oedipal dimensions, and the Sergeant was thankful he wouldn't have to sort them out. He didn't see any evidence of a crime. If Richter was a molester, he would do it again, and next time they could keep an eye out for clues. For the moment, they had no choice. Nobody wanted the kids except these two. And nobody could have taken them away from their mother, anyway, without a shit-pile of evidence.

The Sergeant leaned toward Joanne Richter, who sat across from him, pressing her knees together in a beige skirt suit, one hand folded in her husband's hands, in his lap. Blackthorn suggested, "Why don't you give the kid some attention? Buy an ice-cream cone, or something?"

"We'll do that," said Arthur Richter. "On the way home."

Nicky wasn't locked in her room, or even the house, though she had to tell them everywhere she was going in advance. At night, the terror in her room turned into a strange eagerness -- she hoped to see the door creep open and his hairy body lumber in through a shaft of light in the hall. She imagined screaming her head off, until her mother and the neighbors, the Sergeant and his patrolmen had no choice but to see what was happening. But Arthur never came in, and Nicole began to wonder if she hadn't dreamed it after all, as his oily lawyer said. Or was this his newest way of torturing her? And then she understood.

"Your sister's coming home tomorrow, Nicole," her mother told her at breakfast. "I don't want you filling her head with nonsense. Isn't that right, Arty?"

"Mmm," said Arty, sipping his grapefruit juice.

He wouldn't even look at her. He was watching the morning news on a TV set propped on the microwave. But Nicole understood: she was too old for him now and had betrayed him by spilling their secret to the police. He would punish her by ignoring her, turning his attention to her rival -- Tiffany.

Nicky almost screamed. She managed to control herself, because she needed to. She couldn't let him interfere with her plan. Tiff would be coming home the next day. That left no time for a single mistake. They had to trust Nicky enough to leave her alone in the

house. "I'll hardly make a peep," she promised her mother, and surprised her by stroking her hair at the table and kissing her the cheek.

"Stop that," said Arthur.

Not for his own sake. Touching made Joanne uncomfortable.

Both of them hurried out a little earlier that morning, Arthur to work and Joanne to the gym. She had half a dozen errands to run and wanted to get half of them done before Angela showed up at ten. That was only three errands -- would they really take her an hour? But Nicole was in no mood to fight with her mother. After Arthur left, she walked Joanne to the garage door and gave her another kiss on the threshold.

"What's that for?" asked Joanne, wiping off her cheek.

"Good-bye," said Nicky.

"Good-bye to you too, honey," her mother replied.

As soon as the door closed behind her mother's Beemer, Nicole raced upstairs, taking the steps two at a time. She was breathless at the top but wouldn't stop before she searched his bureau. It wasn't in his sock drawer, the one for his silk boxers, or the one he kept full of cotton: t-shirts and sleeveless things, handkerchiefs, pajamas, and -- buried in the back -- a brassiere her mother had accused Nicky of stealing. But what Nicole wanted wasn't in that drawer, and she opened the longer ones. Trousers and sweat pants, tennis and bicycle shorts, plaid shorts and bathing suits, a couple of slimy magazines, and, hidden under everything else -- there it was. She reached in gingerly but didn't want to touch it. Yet her fingers closed around its ivory handle and slid the long rattlesnake thong out of the drawer. She swung it back and forth a few times, feeling how the ebony ball at the base of the handle improved your grip on the ivory. The rattlesnake thong smashed a few bottles

on Arthur's chest, then sailed back across the room to wrap around the crossbar of a chair at his desk. She dragged it towards her with a snap of her wrist. Nicole needed that chair.

She set it under the hook in the center of the room and climbed on the cane seat. The chair wobbled beneath her. She was careful not to tip it. His iron chandelier hung overhead. She lifted it from its hook, stepped down off the chair, and set it on the floor, where she knew in advance the chain and wire would reach. Then she climbed back onto the chair, careful not to step through the cane. She fed the small end of the rattlesnake thong through the hook in the ceiling and tied a triple knot around it. She tugged it, to be sure. Then she looped the bottom end, knotting it at the handle. Nicky stuck her head through the circle, flattened the thong where it chafed, and yanked hard on the ebony ball. She felt it cut into the soft flesh of her neck. Then, with a silent prayer for Tiffany, she kicked over his chair.

25. Bridget Torwald

I was the first to hear about it. I was spanging on the Promenade in front of Midnight Special when I saw one of those throwaway papers stacked outside. It had a picture of Nicole Richter from her junior high school yearbook. I didn't take it well.

I went off on a bender for a week. I knew I couldn't go back to the Crib drunk as I was, but that was all right with me, since I couldn't have faced Annabel Lee anyway.

Johnny heard about it from another kid on the stroll. He went straight home at two in the morning, but by the time he reached the Crib, Annabel Lee was already gone. When he saw the empty cot and her pillowcase gone, Johnny felt an ashcan pop in his navel. It blew a hole in his belly. The flies buzzed in and out. He knew where she went, but he didn't know exactly where that would take her. But he was mad enough or sad enough to reach out for help. He went to see Bridget Torwald, Juvenile Outreach Officer for the SMPD.

Police Headquarters are located in the same area as the Santa Monica courthouse and City Hall, near the civic auditorium and RAND Corporation. Across the street is the high school. Johnny tried to avoid the place at all costs. To a homeless teenager it meant warnings, warrants, and the threat of imprisonment. But he had to find Annabel Lee in a hurry and risked a stroll through Bluecoat Central to do it. He went straight to the bullet-proof counter and asked the officer if Bridget Torwald was on duty. The officer behind the plastic looked him over doubtfully, but *Torwald* was the one name people like Johnny could ask for.

He sat in the waiting area, counting the floor tiles, until Officer Torwald appeared from behind a wooden door at the end of the hall, where the detectives kept their desks.

Dressed in her crisp blue uniform.

"Can I help you?" Her tone implied *probably not*.

"Remember me?" asked Johnny.

"Of course." She didn't. "A robbery, right?"

"A beating. My uncle called you to the emergency room. Francis."

"With the Doberman?"

"That's him."

"Sorry, but we never turned up a lead on those gang kids. Of course, you didn't give us much to go on, did you?"

"I want to report a missing person tonight," he said. "A runaway."

Bridget blinked. "You want to report a runaway?"

"Yeah."

She pulled a memo pad out of her belt. Okay. Where is he?"

"She," Johnny corrected. "And I don't know, exactly. I want you to find her."

"Where is she missing from?"

"From home."

"And where is that?"

He shrugged. "Wherever I happen to be."

Officer Torwald lifted her pencil. "Any idea where she is now?"

"Someplace in Hollywood."

"That's out of our jurisdiction." Bridget said it fast, and must have heard how it sounded. "I'm sorry, but there's nothing I can do about it."

"She's going to die there," said Johnny.

"I can't help that."

"Sure you can," he said. "You're a cop, right? There are cops in Hollywood too. Some of them know her. Her name is Annabel Lee, and her pimp is going to kill her. You could save her life with a phone call, if you're willing to try."

At first he thought he blew it with Torwald, when her mouth twisted up. Then she left him in the waiting room and went to make the call. Johnny had time to leaf through the magazines, which made the ones in the bus terminal look fresh off the press. He read that scientists are studying dolphin sonar, which is more advanced than the kind used at airports. Just what a person needed to know while he waited for an officer to tell him that no one found his Toyota, or that his daughter was raped on her baby-sitting job. Johnny couldn't sit in his plastic chair anymore. He leaned against a wall, reading wanted posters and brochures that told you how to protect yourself from home robbery.

Officer Torwald returned fifty minutes later.

"I'm sorry," she said, and this time she seemed to mean it. "I spoke to a colleague at the Hollywood substation who works with juveniles. I told him someone in our City Attorney's Office had a personal interest in this girl. He promised to call back in twenty minutes. It took him more than thirty-five. But when he called, I understood why. You don't rush to deliver that kind of news."

Johnny swallowed something rising in his throat.

"What news?"

"He said someone who matched her description was found dead last night." She paused, but he didn't say anything. "I told him about the pimp you mentioned, and he said he knew all about Boo. They checked his whereabouts, and discovered he had been at a talk on AIDS prevention, sponsored by Children of the Night. It was a fundraiser. He signed in early and the nurse remembers him asking questions at the end."

"What about his gorilla?"

"You didn't tell me he had a gorilla."

"You're a cop, aren't you?"

"A police officer."

"Okay, a police officer. Do I have to tell you everything?"

"You have to tell me something. Like -- who is this girl? Why is she important?"

"Aren't they all important?"

Officer Torwald colored. Johnny never saw a cop do that. "Look," she said, "my colleague said he knew your Annabel Lee. He even busted her once. You want to know everything he told me? Without the varnish?"

Johnny nodded. He gripped his left elbow in his right hand, but otherwise you'd never know he was listening particularly.

"He said, 'She was a junkie whore, whose mother is still a junkie whore, living in old Hollywood. As much as we'd like to nail her pimp, she probably just picked up the wrong customer. End of story. It happens all the time. Tell whoever it is in your City Attorney's to care about somebody else.'"

Bridget watched for a second, but Johnny just sat there. "I'm sorry," she said. "You're right. They *are* important, to somebody. At least the lucky ones are. She was lucky to have you to care about her."

Johnny still didn't say a thing. Bridget turned to go, but before she could move down the hallway, he had one final question for her.

"Her arms -- were they clean?"

"What does it matter?"

"I asked you if her arms were clean."

"No," she said, "as a matter of fact. According to my colleague."

Johnny's head fell between his shoulders. Bridget excused herself and headed down the hall. He heard her heels on the tile and the click as she closed the door to the detectives' offices. He looked up and stared through the bullet-proof plastic, until the officer on the far side started fidgeting at her desk, as if the plastic weren't thick enough between them for her comfort.

Johnny did not believe it was Annabel Lee on the slab in the Hollywood morgue. He did not believe it because he didn't want it to be true. And he had another reason, too. He didn't believe she was on the slab because he didn't believe she went back to the life. In fact he *knew* she hadn't gone back to the life.

This is the way he talked it through, to himself.

Johnny knew that Annabel Lee hadn't gone back to the stroll, because he knew she hadn't gone back on the needle, because he knew how she had got off it. Because he was the one who had helped her. He was the one who had made her do it. He knew how much agony Annabel Lee had gone through, because he went through every bit of it with her.

And he knew what she had promised him, because he promised her the same thing. There aren't too many times people are as honest as they are when they're in pain. I never saw a woman giving birth. I hear that's pretty gruesome. But there's no greater pain that I ever saw than trying to break a heroin habit, cold turkey.

Maybe you don't know what that means. But Johnny did.

He spent three days and nights sleeping on the floor next to her cot. He would squeeze her sweaty hand when she called out for him, and towel her down when she felt the chill of her own sweat. When she started to shake, he lay alongside her, telling her anything she wanted to hear to calm her and keep her warm. When she really started screaming, there wasn't a lot he could do. He wiped her behind and cleaned off the vomit from her face and neck when she threw up, sobbing. He held her head in his arms and whispered in her ear, promising things would be better soon. He didn't care what he said. He was just saving her life. He smelled like her, tasting her hair in his mouth and her sweat and the salt from her red-rimmed eyes.

What you need in a situation like that is codeine, a narcotic related to heroin. But codeine is not easy to come by. Johnny was able to get one bottle of prescription cough syrup with a splash of codeine in it. He knew that wouldn't be enough to get her through. So he bought three more bottles of Robitussin. When she first started screaming in pain, holding her belly, he gave her the prescription stuff. The next time, he gave her a shot of Robitussin. She probably thought it hadn't helped as much. He gave her some codeine the next time around, and the next couple of times Robitussin. That way, two things must have happened: she felt a certain relief, drinking it down, whether or not it actually had any

codeine in it, and by the time he got through with her head, the Robitussin must have had some effect.

Isn't that how they trained those pigeons to hit that bar? You give them food when they peck at the bar, until they do it without getting any food. But they keep pecking at the bar. Your brain learns that the sweet red stuff brings relief. And then it does bring relief, whatever narcotic is or isn't a part of it. Your brain is basically the same as a pigeon's.

Johnny did not believe it was Annabel Lee on the slab, and he was ready to put his heart where his mouth was. Without help from the police, there was only one way to cover the ground he needed to cover quickly. He went to his Uncle Francis and begged. Francis was not used to being in that position, with Johnny wanting anything out of him. But he played it smart, like a gambler. He told Johnny he would drive him through the streets of Hollywood, if Johnny came home with him to his condo in the Marina, whether or not they found her.

Could he bring her along?

Sure, said Francis, if they found her.

Francis was no Rocky Marciano, and couldn't have helped against Boo. But his Corvette was fast, and it attracted attention. If Annabel Lee was out on the street, and wanted to, she would see it. If they had to chase her down the block, the 'Vette could do it faster than any taxi Johnny could hail. They didn't usually stop for him on the streets of Hollywood, anyway.

So Johnny made his deal with his father's brother, and soon he and Uncle Francis sat side by side in a red Corvette, cruising the streets of Hollywood in search of Annabel Lee. They drove around for hours without a clue. Johnny kept his window rolled down,

not only so he could call out if he spotted her. The inside of the car smelled faintly of urine, despite all the detailing Francis had done to try to get it out, and Johnny felt a little ashamed of that. Not enough to actually apologize for doing it, but enough to roll down his window to dilute the smell.

Every time they came to a stoplight, a hundred kids crossed in front of the Vette, and half a dozen girls looked like Annabel Lee. One time, Francis leaned forward and pointed. "Isn't that her?" Johnny shook his head. Francis settled back, and you couldn't tell if it was him or the seat that sighed. "She's not here, John. She could be anywhere. Whaddya say we call it a night?"

Johnny stared at his uncle. "What did you say?"

Francis's bland face cracked in a smile. "You remember that?"

"What?"

"Your father used to use that expression all the time. And I'll tell you where he got it from, too. When we were at Pendleton, we used to step out at night, partying hard, you know? One night, we're climbing over the fence into the camp, and the sun comes up, and he stops on the crossbar at the top of the fence, and he looks at the pink rays over the eastern hills, and he says to me, 'Why don't we call it a night?' That was a joke, see, because we had already blown it. It was day. But that didn't stop him from suggesting it, like it wasn't too late to think of it. Then afterwards, whenever it was too late to make good, he'd say, 'Let's call it a night.' And laugh."

Johnny looked out the window. He could hardly see the people across the street, blurs of color on the tinted glass. "I don't want to call it a night."

"What?"

"I said the light changed. Keep looking, all right?"

Francis stepped on the gas. "You're as big a ball-buster as he was, you know that? 'The light changed.' Well, thank *you*. Jesus."

They didn't find her that night, and they didn't on the next one either, and Johnny stayed with Francis while they searched. It was just as well that he did. Because the City Council met in Santa Monica, and Emil Yermer addressed them, testifying how an idle worksite in Palisades Park had created an opportunity for homeless youths to sleep in the park undetected. And on the strength of his account, the residents of the million-dollar condos across the street dropped their objection to the construction of a new bathroom on the northern end of the parkway. The Planning Commission breathed a sigh of relief, and Southern California Construction promised to resume work on the project immediately.

By the third day of Johnny's search, a foreman had moved into the shack by the hole, and the earth-movers were on their way to Inspiration Point. By the fourth day of Johnny's search for Annabel Lee, the Crib was a working job-site again.

26. Henry Zacharias

Johnny and Francis ate dinner together every night. Francis had to work by day and couldn't spend all his time driving the boulevards of Hollywood for a lost teenager. Sometimes they went out early and sometimes after midnight, but Johnny always had the feeling, whenever the 'Vette turned home, that Annabel Lee was climbing out of a car or standing in a doorway, just around the corner. Francis distracted him on the ride home with odd bits of information about their extended family. They had some second cousins in Florida they ought to visit sometime. *Why?* Johnny would ask. Well, the weather is beautiful down there, especially on the golf courses. Was Johnny ever on a golf course? Most of the time Johnny didn't answer. None of it made much sense, which didn't bother Francis, who said that's the way relatives always talked to each other.

"Like Drago?"

But even that old rivalry softened over time. Johnny might have remembered his rescue in the dog run, or outgrown his fear of the dog. Francis knew enough not to ask Johnny about it. One night Johnny even asked if he could take the dog for a walk along Mother's Beach, a stretch of sand along an inlet of the Marina. Francis agreed, but held his breath until they came back, both of them panting, Johnny with ruddy cheeks and the dog with his tongue hanging out. They must have been running back and forth together. For some reason, the idea made Francis's heart leap inside his ribs.

On their twelfth night, they were eating Killer Shrimp on the table in the dining nook. They had gone out before seven and driven around for four hours. They were seeing the same faces, night after night, even when they went at different hours. People on the

street were starting to recognize the 'Vette, and cops watched them pass through narrowed eyes. Francis was starting to feel like a chicken hawk. But they kept going, block after block, and the fact that Francis was willing to keep at it sparked some hope in Johnny. Francis had the feeling that Johnny was close to giving up on his own. There didn't seem to be any point. If she was out on the streets of that city, what had become of her by now? And if she wasn't in Hollywood, how long could they go on, roaming up and down the boulevards?

Johnny poked his finger in the carton and fished out another shrimp. Francis had insisted earlier on spooning their food out of the cardboard cartons onto serving plates. Then he insisted they eat it on two dinner plates. By now, he wasn't insisting on anything except that Johnny leave some shrimp for him, no matter how slowly he ate it.

"Want to go out again?" Francis asked. "Later tonight?"

"I don't know," said Johnny.

"Tomorrow's Thursday. We can knock off early then, and still be in shape for the weekend run."

"Right," said Johnny. "Maybe later tonight."

But when the cartons had been emptied, crushed, and saved in the recycling bin, Johnny stared at the window for a while and asked if he could take Drago out for a run. He felt restless. Francis gave him the leash and two plastic bags. "You don't have to ask every time."

Johnny looked suspicious. "I can walk him whenever I want?"

That wasn't what Francis meant. But he hesitated, remembering how well Johnny knew him. "Any time."

It's so hard to remember he's a child, Francis thought, as Johnny clomped down the stairs outside the condo, with Drago's toenails clattering after him. Francis looked out the kitchen window at the moon floating over the water and wondered to what kind god he owed this moment of bliss?

* * *

As it happened no divinity was involved, since Johnny had lied about his reason for leaving the condo. He might have felt restless, but he wanted to walk because he saw the Mole's face outside the window. He was dipping a Killer Shrimp into killer cocktail sauce when his focus suddenly shifted from his own pale reflection in the windowpane to the Mole's slender face, waiting for Johnny to realize what he was seeing.

That's when he asked to walk Drago.

At the bottom of the steps, the dog ran ahead and the Mole fell in behind him.

"Hey," said Johnny.

"Hey yourself," said the Mole.

They walked a little while in silence, passing sailboats moored at their docks, creaking in the cool night wind. Their sails were furled and their lines sagged as they floated in the silent ink along the piers. The boys passed over a strip of grass and slid down an embankment to Mother's Beach. This was a short arc of sand running from a playground below the Cheesecake Factory, around a small bay, to a pier on the opposite bank, where kayak races are launched. Dotting the sand was a series of wooden shacks, open on two sides, with benches and a soda machine. When the Mole had settled on a

bench and popped a can of coke, Johnny let the dog off its leash. Then he sat down too and stretched out his legs in front of him.

“How did you find me?”

The Mole laughed. “He has the dog registered. In case it’s ever stolen. I called the police and said I found a Doberman with brown spots and a collar that read, *Drago*. They punched it in the computer and gave me his address.”

Johnny crushed an old can in the sand. “Francis never did that for me.”

“Time to get over it,” said the Mole, offering the coke.

“You okay?”

“I’m eating pretty good. How about you?”

Johnny watched the dog at the far end of the beach. “Life sucks a big one.”

“You mean for Annabel Lee?”

Johnny whistled, but the dog didn’t come, so he threw back his head and poured a stream of soda down his throat. He gargled with it before swallowing, and finished the performance with a belch. “I mean for all of us.”

“You’ll find her.”

“Not this way, I won’t, Mole. But it’s Henry now, isn’t it?”

He shrugged as if to answer, *Either way is fine*.

“Henry, then,” said Johnny.

“Okay,” said the Mole. “Not what way?”

“Not by car. If I could, I would have found her already. What’s gonna change tomorrow night? We could roll up Hollywood Boulevard from end to end, back and forth forever, and still never spot her from our spiffy red Corvette.”

“You’re giving up on Annabel Lee?”

It was Johnny’s turn to shrug. “She’s given up on me, Mole. On all of us, Henry. How are the Prescotts making out?”

“They’re fine. But I’m no good at it.”

“Come on! Everybody’s good at being rich.”

He took the can from Johnny and sipped. “It’s not so easy.”

“Poor Mole.”

Henry smiled and turned up his hands. “They gave me a bicycle, but I fell off. So they got me a helmet and kneepads. Now I fall off the bicycle in a helmet and kneepads. Did you ever try in-line skates?”

“No --”

“Mr. Prescott -- I’m supposed to call him Warren -- wants to do things with me. He’s gonna sign me up for baseball and soccer. And boy scouts. He told me all about the boy scouts. You know what they do? Leave their warm homes and families to sleep in the woods, in a tent on the ground, while nobody sleeps in their bedrooms. Wear patches all over their shirts, even though they don’t have any holes.”

“You can do the boy scouts.”

“Sure, I can. You know why? Because they have colors and signs and things you have to do in order to join, like any other gang. The kind of shit I’m used to.”

“They got you toys and everything, didn’t they?”

“Yeah, but it’s not like in the shelters. It’s different when it’s yours, and nobody else is waiting for a turn. I know I’m supposed to go zombie over video games, but those

buttons make my thumbs ache. How many hours can you sit, killing monsters in a cave, when there are so many real-life monsters out on the streets?"

"They don't know those monsters."

"Yeah. But we do."

Johnny was watching the moon on the water, when some bubbles started popping for no reason. The surface rippled in circles, as if something large were about to rise from the depths. They both watched, waiting for the Creature from the Black Lagoon. But a minute later, the bubbles stopped coming and the circles spread out across the inlet. When Johnny turned, his eyes were as wide as the Mole's, but they crinkled when he smiled. "The night has a terrible beauty," he said, "most people never see."

"It's also cold," the Mole replied. A chill wind blew, and they shivered together, enjoying it.

Johnny zipped up his jacket and remembered September. "You going back?"

The Mole shook his head. "I can't see me living there."

"What about your girlfriend?"

"Priss? She's a cruel little beast. No, she's a *girl* -- who's never seen much of the world. The problem is, she doesn't know it." He looked pained. "None of 'em know it, Johnny. They think they've seen the world because they've been to Wyoming, to ski. Or scuba diving in Hawaii. Places where people are nice to you for a tip. They think that's the real world."

"Well, it's part of it, right?"

“Not any part that I ever saw. And I’ve seen more than most people.” He smiled, apologizing in advance, and put both hands on his heart. “I still haven't found what I'm looking for -- ”

It wasn't a bad imitation of Bono, and the rest of the song started running through Johnny's head: *I have run, I have crawled -- I have scaled these city walls -- only to be with you --* Then he heard the words he was thinking and cut them off. “So where are you going now?”

The Mole inhaled the salt air. “Out.”

“Wait a minute,” said Johnny. “I’ve got something for you.”

“Where?”

“Right here.”

He took off his left shoe.

The Mole was wondering, *What can I do with one shoe?*

“In the sole,” said Johnny. He reached inside and took out a moist wad of cash. If it hadn’t been a wad when it was jammed into the toes, it was certainly a wad now. The outer bills were wilted like leaves of old lettuce.

The Mole wrinkled his nose. “You've been walking on it?”

“It's still legal tender, right?”

“It smells like shit.”

“I raised it for Nicky and Tiff. Now I don’t know what to do with it.”

The Mole lifted the mass and inspected it gingerly. “I know what to do with it. If you do something for me.”

“Like what?”

The Mole looked him straight in the eyes. "Don't give up, okay?" He tried to make it casual but it sounded like it mattered to him. Johnny didn't know how to answer, so he didn't answer at all. "Okay," the Mole said finally. "See you later."

"Sure."

Johnny watched as the Mole climbed the hill to Palawan Road and headed down toward Washington. He'd keep going west to the beach and then turn south along the boardwalk. He would have to be careful. There would be people crouching in doorways, watching from first floor windows, blowing into their cupped hands, asking for change. Their faces would appear for an instant in the glow from a street lamp, or a passing car's headlights, and disappear into the darkness again. And somewhere out there, Annabel Lee was one of those fleeting faces, who turned up with a moment's hope at the sound of a passing stranger, and then closed up again as their footsteps passed.

Only to be with you -- only to be with you --

Johnny felt the flies again, buzzing in and out of his belly. But he felt something else in there too, a ball of fire that threatened to rise up his throat. He watched the masts bobbing at the dock, rocking in the swell of a motorboat. And he did not feel like rocking along with the tide. There was something in the world that he cared about, and nothing else for him to do. Johnny had found what he was looking for. He whistled for the dog, rattled his leash, and waited for Drago to lope across the sand.

Uncle Francis liked to watch the news in bed, and Leno, if he could stay up. He still slept with the dog at the foot of his bed, but he kept the door ajar now, so that Johnny heard the soothing mumble of his fifty-four-inch TV. Now he listened through the crack in his bedroom door for Johnny's steps and the clinks of Drago's chain inside the condo.

Eleven-thirty came, and still they hadn't returned, and all sorts of nightmares screeched through his brain. Johnny wouldn't hurt a dumb animal, Francis thought again and again. But if something happened beyond his control, would he have the nerve to tell his Uncle Francis? Was it possible that the two of them -- boy and dog -- might run off together? Francis refused to believe it. But the fact that he had to resist it revealed the other voices in the back of his skull.

Then all the doubts congealed into fear when he heard a noise at the condo's door. Something was scratching low on the door. Francis jumped out of bed, threw a terrycloth bathrobe around his pajamas, and stumbled to the front door. "Just a minute," he called, more than once while he struggled with the lock, which always stuck at the worst times -- why hadn't he fixed it already? He shook it violently and got it open.

Drago was sitting outside, panting.

A flush of relief flooded through Francis. He bent and hugged the dog in his arms. "There you are, sweetheart! Are you all right? Are you all right?" He grabbed the dog's snout in his hand and lifted it, so the Doberman's brown eyes met his own. "Of course you are! Of course. Would you like a special treat? Yes, Uncle Francis has a biscuit just for you." He started into the kitchen, and then he remembered. Perhaps the name *Uncle Francis* rang a bell. Perhaps it was just too quiet, all of a sudden.

"Where's Johnny?" he asked the dog. He opened the front door wider and peered out into the darkness. A wind rocked the masts of the boats in the harbor. A gull flapped its wingspan and settled on a post. The stars glinted down through the clear, cold night.

But Johnny was nowhere in sight.

27. Aunt Emily

I dreamed that I saw Boo again, waiting for me to explain what had happened to Annabel Lee. I forced myself awake and discovered it wasn't Boo looming over me. It was Henry Zacharias, formerly known as the Mole, who said, "Hey there, handsome. Ready to dry out?"

"Ugghhh." I tried to roll over.

"It's time to get up, Moses. Your people need delivering."

"I don't have any people," I complained.

"Yes, you do," he said evenly. "And one of them is waiting for us."

I sat up, rubbed one eye, and started on the other. Light was sneaking through a window with a sheet of rotten plywood over it. The room looked familiar. It was Bette's old place in the squat -- only Bette hadn't been there in a couple of weeks. That's what the kid told me who let me in the fire escape. I didn't know the password, so I tried *Bette* and *Rebekah*. The boy knew who I was talking about. He said, "Lookit, we don't need trouble in here. You can have her room, if you want it."

I was drunk enough to take it.

"Nice place," said the Mole, "if you're into garbage."

My head felt like a heavy metal band was auditioning in my skull, and not getting the job. "Can't you go without me?"

"No," said the Mole. "I don't know the way."

"Take Johnny, then."

"I can't take Johnny. He's gone."

I sat up, blinking each eye separately. “Johnny’s gone? Where?”

He shook his head. “Gone. It’s up to us now, Moses.”

“All right,” I said. “Let’s do it.”

A couple of hours later we were standing on Sunset, outside the development where the Richters lived. The back gate swung wide, and a woman held it open for a girl. We stood where they had to pass as they walked up the block to the Brentwood School. It was the last week of August, and Tiffany had been registered for the fall. Her parents didn’t want her answering questions at Harvard Westlake and wouldn’t let her too far out of sight. The Brentwood School was up the hill and across the street, so Joanne could run her over in the mornings. Or that had been the plan. Now she was trudging up Sunset Boulevard to her new school, and Angela was walking beside her.

When Tiffany caught sight of us, she stopped in her tracks. Angela had to stop too, since she was holding Tiffany’s hand. “Who are you?” she asked, stepping between us and Tiff, as if we looked like kidnappers.

“Nicole sent us,” said the Mole.

Did you ever hear somebody think out loud? We could see a thousand thoughts cross Angela’s face in half a second. She was thinking about everything she had heard, and all the gossip she had refused to listen to, because she didn’t want to consider what it meant for the girl. She was thinking about everything she had seen, or picked up under the dresser, and weighing that against the gossip. And she was sizing us up, wondering if she could trust us, if this was her chance to save the girl. We never asked, *Do you want what happened to the other sister to happen now to this one?* Angela understood all that. She just wasn’t sure we had a better plan than the one that killed Nicole.

“Where? Not on the streets again?”

“Tulsa,” I told her.

“With the father’s family,” added the Mole.

“She’ll be safe there,” I said.

Angela knelt in front of the girl. “Do you know these?”

Tiff nodded.

“Do you want to go with them?”

Again, an eager nod.

She offered us Tiffany’s hand. “Vaya con Dios.”

It was Tiffany who asked, “Won’t you get into trouble? If I go again?”

“Less trouble than you, if you stay,” said Angela. And she shooed us away.

Tiff looked back from the top of the hill and waved.

Angela didn't wave back.

* * *

The bus ride to Tulsa was the most boring time I ever spent on the road. Miles and miles of scrub brush between here and there, especially once you get to the other side of Indio. The desert may have a desolate beauty all its own, but you don't get to see it through the window of a Greyhound. And there's only so many times you can sing about bottles of beer on the wall. For one thing, how do those bottles stay on the wall? And who keeps putting them back up there, after they fall?

The Mole acted like he hadn't had a chance to catch a few zees in years. His head hit the seat cushion and he was good for a hundred miles of snoring. Tiffany was the saving grace of my ride. No matter how much nothing surrounded us, no matter where we were, she always noticed something that she thought was worth asking about, or pointing out to me. She was big on cactuses, I remember, which I'm sorry but I can't call *cacti* no matter what her teacher said.

I didn't know the difference between a bunny and a jackrabbit. I thought it was just where you bumped into them. I never heard of a bunny stew or the Easter Jackrabbit. A *bunny* is a *rabbit*, I thought, because sometimes you call them *bunny rabbits*, but you never call them *bunny jackrabbits*. So maybe a jackrabbit isn't a rabbit, right? That's the way our conversations went, for two days, listening to the hum of the engine two rows behind us, as the tires turned and turned, carrying us further and further from Art Richter and closer and closer to Aunt Emily, whoever she was. Sometimes I thought about her, wondering if she would really take Tiffany in, or if the three of us would find ourselves in the Tulsa bus station with a kiss from Aunt Emily but without the fare to get back. The Mole and I planned to hitch, but that vague plan depended on our dropping off Tiffany at Auntie Em's house. The three of us in the middle of the desert with our thumbs out -- Nicky wouldn't have considered that a plan.

"We'll have to look that up, when we get to a dictionary," said Tiff as she settled back in the chair next to mine.

As it happened, Aunt Emily had not only a dictionary, she had an encyclopaedia, which hadn't been opened in the thirty years since her brother finished high school. He was Tiffany's father's cousin, Edwin, who was just going to fall over at the sight of her,

according to Aunt Emily. When we came into Tulsa, we looked them up in the telephone book, just to make sure they were still alive, and Aunt Emily had insisted on coming to pick us up in the pick-up. She was a very nice woman in her late fifties, with brown hair streaked both blonde and gray, so you knew the blonde was not from a bottle but from working in the sun. It turned out she wasn't Tiffany's grandmother, as I had thought, but her father's father's sister.

I should have known that from her name, I guess.

There was no question about whether she would take Tiffany in. We told her the whole story, and she shook her head through most of it, and in parts she cried. Silently. She didn't make a big thing out of it, like she wanted any sympathy for what happened to her. The tragedy belonged to somebody else, but because she cared for Tiffany and for Nicole too, even though she hadn't seen her in nine years, she cried. That's what she said. You're supposed to cry when you hear about somebody suffering, especially if you love them. That sounded right to me, even if you don't see it too often.

She thanked me and the Mole for what we had done for Tiffany and for what we had tried to do for Nicole. We told her there was no reason to thank us. We didn't do it for anybody else but ourselves. She said that's why she was thanking us. I could see that Tiffany would have her brains full, working out the logic around there.

Aunt Emily gave us something for lunch -- salami sandwiches, with sardines in them on white bread with mustard and mayonnaise. Then we waited around for some other relatives to show up. The Mole said we ought to be going, to catch the light, but Tiffany asked us to wait with her, so we waited. Aunt Emily showed her a room, and Tiff had to show it to us, so we could picture her sleeping in it. That made me think of her sleeping

under the table in the Crib. But I didn't mention that in front of Aunt Emily, because I didn't want her to start crying again.

I was disappointed when Uncle Edwin didn't actually fall over on seeing Tiffany, but he did tell her how big she was about a million times, and when Aunt Emily insisted, he bent down and gave her a hug. That was nice to see. Then he also thanked me and the Mole, which was getting monotonous, so we said we better be going. Tiffany gave each of us a big hug too, and just when we were ready to go, she remembered that we hadn't looked up jackrabbits yet. So we did. It turns out *bunny* is chiefly a child's term, while a *jackrabbit* is a longer-eared, longer-legged hare. The name comes from *jackass rabbit*, because of its ears. A *rabbit* is anything with a cottontail that hops, although there's still an argument over whether that includes hares.

So then we knew. Emily wanted us to stay for dinner, but it was still hours away, and the truth was it hurt to see Tiff with her family in Tulsa. It made us think of Nicky. They tried to give us money for the bus ride, too, but we weren't about to take any. Aunt Emily insisted at least on Uncle Edwin driving us to the highway, which wouldn't take anything away from them.

We accepted the ride, and bumped along in the oldest flatbed truck still riding the highways of the United States. Made of wood. While the Mole was climbing out, I said, "You're not gonna let them take her back, are you?"

It took Uncle Edwin a minute to gather up his words, as if he had to scrape them off the bottom of a barrel. He didn't have all his teeth, and the ones he did have were yellow and tilted one way or the other when he clamped them down. "Don't you worry 'bout Tiff no more," he promised. "Ain't nothing bad gonna happen, now that Emily got ahold of

her." That was all I needed to hear. I shook his hand and he thanked us again, and finally left us at the side of the road.

We stood at the entrance ramp to Interstate 244 for thirty-five minutes before we got a lift from a forty-year-old shoe salesman in a rented Buick, on his way to Phoenix. He'd been on the road for eight hours and wanted somebody to talk to, to keep him alert. He asked if we had any stories. The Mole looked at me and let his head flop against the seat and went right back to sleep for another hundred miles.

We had a great time on that trip home. The Mole still had money left over from the wad Johnny had given him, so we made it into a holiday. We stopped at Thirty-Nine Palms to see the twisted Joshua Trees in the desert. Truly weird. Whenever we went into a luncheonette, the Mole found some super-special deal on the menu, so we ate well and felt good and stood at the side of the highway with an air of contentment people could see through their windshields. We never spent more than five hours waiting for a lift, which is good hitching time for a clean-cut college type. When people picked us up, we told them that we were a couple of college kids out for a lark before school began in the Fall. Annabel Lee would have laughed, but most people took us seriously. They may have had their doubts, but you can't always tell the difference between a homeless and college kid. We made a cardboard sign that read, *HOME 2 UCLA*.

One guy driving a blue-and-gold Camaro squealed up to where we stood on a street corner and snorted at our sign. "Who do you think you're kidding? You guys would be lucky to get into Camarillo." Which used to be an insane asylum but is now a regular prison in the California system.

The Mole said, "You just did forty miles an hour in a twenty mile an hour zone. And that's beer on your breath, isn't it? My guess is you'll be spending time in a cell long before we do." The guy tried to run over his toes, but the Mole just laughed his strange little laugh and reminded me about it the whole rest of the day.

When we got back to Los Angeles, we weren't sure where to go. The Mole didn't feel like explaining to the Prescotts where he went, and I didn't feel like seeing Bette's old squat. We went by Inspiration Point. The ditch had been filled with concrete, and steel rods stuck up into the air. It reminded us that Johnny and Annabel Lee weren't around -- or if they were, we didn't know where to find them. I didn't want to let the feelings from Aunt Emily's slip away, so I made a call to my Gran and learned that my aunt Larisse had come back for her kids two months before. Gran was living alone again, and if I wanted, I could come back and live with her too.

I wanted to do that. But I couldn't abandon the Mole. It posed a problem for me, until I mentioned it to her, and she said he could come along. I asked her how she could swing that, considering she couldn't feed the two of us and a housecat, but she said that was different. There's such a thing as foster care, where they pay you to take in children, and the Mole sounded to Gran like he might qualify. The Mole said he didn't mind, so long as he didn't have to ride a bike.

It took him a while to get used to living with people, and to find his way around the neighborhood. If we hadn't lived together in the Crib all summer, I doubt he could have stuck it out. But whenever he got frustrated, I reminded him of one time or another when we thought every headlight that swept through the park might find us in the Crib and make us move along. Nobody could make us move from my Gran's house. And she liked having

us there. At night we would sit up in the dark and think of Tiff in Emily's house, and it didn't hurt so much.

After a while, the Mole could even find his way back and forth to high school, where a certain counselor, who was also a teacher in the math department, told Gran that the Mole wasn't pretty good with numbers -- he was *very* good with them. And he told her about this program at USC that helps kids in the local neighborhood go to college, if they have enough natural talent and stay in school. This counselor thought Henry had the talent in math. The Mole didn't say anything at first, but then he hit on a solution to the problem in his head by suggesting that I try to get a scholarship too, on the strength of my vocabulary. I told him I couldn't even talk right, but he showed them my notebook and they told me they thought they could do something for me too.

Annabel Lee, wherever you are -- that's one point for you. The Mole is poking my shoulder. He says, "Make it two points." The second one is either for me or because of basketball, which he is learning to play. But I doubt if I'll stick around here for long.

I don't like to stay in one place, and what do I know about igneous rocks? The only thing I can do here is write, and I'm getting pretty tired of that. But there is one more story I need to include, even though it happened after our summer in the park.

About six months after we moved in with Gran, I got a postcard in the mailbox. Or my grandmother did. It was addressed to our place in a rough, block handwriting, but it had no name at the top. The message on the left side was written in a different hand, more feminine than the address. It read:

Still here. Love you, Walker

It could've been one of mine, posted months before and lost in the mail. But it didn't look like my printing, and the comma between *Love you* and *Walker* -- I never put that in. It was the most beautiful comma in the world. The postmark said Tijuana, but on the front was a drawing. In the upper right hand corner was a Mayan god, curled up in the sun like a newborn. From him, squiggly yellow rays rained down on a beach that had brown and white people lying on blankets. Some were swimming or diving for shells. Others were playing volleyball or smash-ball, jet-skiing, wind-surfing, hang-gliding, and para-sailing. The sky overhead was turquoise with flecks of silver and greenish gold, where clumps of cottony yellow clouds spelled out CANCÚN.

They don't make postcards of Mar Vista.