DOODLEBUG

a novel

J. K. Bozeman

DOODLEBUG *is the nickname Alfred, an elderly rancher, gives Trevor when he rescues him from a squalid travel trailer where he'd been abandoned to the care of his drug-addled grandmother and her abusive, alcoholic partner. Now 19, Dude is in a correctional facility charged with assisting the suicide of his guardian. He recalls his unconventional upbringing on a ranch near Nicklesburg, a small town northeast of Dallas, his struggle for acceptance, and his friends.*

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I should admit that, at least by early twenty-first century American social standards, I'm somewhat peculiar.

I've been an avid reader most of my life, so I'm probably more literate than the average high school graduate. Unlike the majority of contemporary late-adolescent males, however, I've never been inside a movie theater, played a video game, used a cell phone, or surfed the Net - though I'm not technophobic, nor completely computer-illiterate.

I'm in the Collin County Correctional Facility, accused of a crime I did not commit. I'm sure you've heard that claim before, but I hope to convince you that in my case it's true.

You would be impressed with how modern, clean and orderly this facility is. If we had more and better books or computers with Internet access, I might be almost content most of the time.

I don't have much in common with most of the guys in here, so I'm lonely and for the first time in my life interested in trying to strike up an Internet relationship – though my chances of finding a compatible correspondent are probably slim. My page on a social site might look something like:

Trevor Lamar Johnson
(Dude to most of my friends)
Nineteen, Caucasian male, heterosexual, orphan,
brought up in country by retired rancher.
Interested in: nearly everything.

Enjoys: basketball, long evening runs, debate, reading, gardening, classical music.

Imagine the excitement that would stir up in some modern young woman's heart.

I'm not all that hard to look at, but I hope I have more going for me than a fairly attractive face and a slightly better-than-average body.

Writing is my only significant talent, and there is little else to do here except watch television or read, and the few books available are mostly about vampires, drug-traffic violence, or far-fetched international conspiracies.

I'm probably writing this mainly for myself, trying to better understand myself and my situation, preparing a defense for my eventual appearance in court. I'm not entirely innocent, but I did not knowingly participate in the suicide of my guardian and benefactor, Mr. Alfred Anthony Fields.

To be perfectly honest, I'm not the least persuaded that, if I had, it would have been wrong. I have never doubted he had the right to take his own life, and, if he had asked me, I would have considered it my obligation to help him.

My greatest regret about his death is that I was too self-involved to notice he needed my help. I'm so squeamish and cowardly I froze up the only time he ever came close to broaching the possibility.

Trevor is a slightly unusual name for Nicklesburg, Texas, the small town about twenty-five miles northeast of Dallas where I went to school. Most of us don't choose our nicknames, and I've never been assertive enough to insist otherwise.

Mr. Alfred stuck me with my tag one sweltering summer afternoon when I was seven. I was squatting in the dirt in the shade of a barn, playing with my favorite toy, a worn but sturdy dump-truck, dressed, as usual, in nothing but a pair of dirty, washed-out toddler shorts. He'd probably been watching me for a while, but startled me with, "Afternoon, Doodlebug."

It was very dry that summer, and there were doodlebug funnels (traps made by ant lions) all around me in the floury-fine silt. I'd been crying earlier, feeling sorry for myself because I was unloved, unwanted, hungry because all I'd had to eat all day had been a grape-jelly sandwich.

I'm sure I was a pathetic sight: scrawny as a stray dog, in nothing but those skimpy shorts, filthy with dust, my face smeared with the tears I'd wiped at with my grubby hand.

"Why, young'un, what you bin cryin 'bout?"

I ducked my head in the chronic shame I suffered then.

"That brother o' mine never did know how t' take care of a dad-blasted thang.

"An' that granmother o' yours aint much better. Prob'ly all loosey-goosey on pills as usual."

I kept my head down, but I couldn't help being engaged by his candor and amused by his homely, old-fashioned language.

He gave me a moment to respond, then continued, "Bet you aint had nothin t' eat all day. Prob'ly aint nothin *to* eat in that filthy trailer-house 'cept maybe some light bread an' what's left of a case o' 'Schlitzburgers'."

I chuckled; he'd guessed about right. "Schlitzburger" was what his younger brother, Mr. Gene (Eugene Arthur Fields), called a can of beer, which he claimed had substantial nutrition and almost always had in his hand or nearby, when he wasn't passed out or asleep. He

maintained - and seemed to actually believe - that by sticking to beer he couldn't become an alcoholic.

He could, however, be a mean drunk, with a volatile temper and an obscene, abusive tongue. I've never in my life encountered anyone with so short a fuse or such offensive language.

After he'd slapped, jerked and slammed me around a few times, I'd learned to escape his attempts at physical violence - which wasn't all that difficult because his contempt for all forms of physical exertion rendered him weak, and his usual inebriation made him clumsy.

My grandmother, Earlene Bernice Johnson, preferred prescription medication, which she pilfered from the invalids she took care of in order to make some semblance of a living - boosted by a few beers, of course.

They lived in the travel trailer because Mr. Gene's house had burned down during one of their binges. I'd been abandoned there because there were no other possibilities except an orphanage or foster home.

I lived mostly in the nearby barn - which wasn't as bad as you might think. It's a sturdy steel building, and the hay in the loft always smelled clean and pleasant.

The horses there were my closest companions, the only dependable acceptance I'd ever found. They would listen to my complaints, daydreams and drivel, their big dark eyes soft with affection and understanding.

Mr. Edward (Mr. Alfred's son), whose grand house was nearby, paid me ten dollars a week to keep the horses fed and the stalls clean - though it was so little to him he usually forgot. And I never had the courage to ask on those rare occasions when I saw him and he bothered to acknowledge my existence.

It didn't matter much anyway, as my grandmother would usually wheedle it out of me, promising to repay it, then give me some elaborate sob story if I was able to find her alone to ask.

I didn't dare ask in front of Mr. Gene, afraid he would explode in one of his long-winded tirades about me always whining for something - an injustice that stung all the more because I rarely ever had the gumption to ask for anything.

The horses were rarely ridden, were just another acquisition, more evidence of Mr. Edward's growing wealth and attempts to gain social prestige.

Except for Mr. Alfred, the whole Fields family seems to be afflicted by an urge to acquire things they don't need and in which they find little, if any, pleasure - a malaise that seems common among modern Americans.

When I read about someone paying millions of dollars for some paint-splattered rectangle of canvas, I wonder if a lot of our wealthier citizens haven't lost their common sense and contact with reality - not to mention awareness of the millions of hungry fellow Americans and the hundreds of thousands of homeless on our city streets and in our over-crowded jails.

At least two of the guys in my pod (an open barracks that will hold up to forty-eight inmates) are homeless, one for "criminal mischief", the other for public intoxication and vagrancy. Several of my fellow inmates seem to have serious psychological problems.

Mr. Gene had retired at the first opportunity, devoted his life to full-time drinking, sold his ranch and frittered away the money on a brand new Cadillac, which he neglected and abused, a fancy bass boat he never used, the travel trailer . . .

Even the travel trailer would probably never have been used, if his house hadn't burned down - with him neglecting to keep up the insurance payments.

I've been called a "goody two-shoes", but I think of myself as sensible and prudent - for plenty of good reasons. During my early years - those generally recognized as the most formative - I had so little security and means of subsistence that I didn't dare risk any of it.

Sleeping in the loft was a lot better than trying to get any rest in that squalid little trailer, with Mr. Gene and my grandmother lurching and stumbling around, squabbling about the least little thing half the night. The way they carried on was like some grotesque sit-com - funny to me sometimes in retrospect, but mostly a lurid nightmare back then.

My grandmother, who I called Earlene, would sometimes get mushy when she'd had a little too much chemical alteration, but I found this embarrassing, harder to take than her usual scolding, whining and nagging.

Their drunken wrangling made the barn a refuge, and I had started sleeping there in the spring, mainly because of a nightmarish incident involving a rat - the origin of my biggest phobia.

I was asleep on the little built-in couch at one end of that cramped trailer when a commotion suddenly burst out. The lights were on, Earlene was screeching and clutching her nightgown to her throat, and Mr. Gene, in his usual boxers, with his penis half hanging out, was stomping and yelling, "Hee-yah!"

She was more addled than usual, having just been rudely awakened from a drugged stupor, grumbling and grunting as she bent over and batted at something with a

frying pan. My most immediate concern was the meat cleaver Mr. Gene was wielding.

They were hectoring a darting gray shape, trying to corner it, slipping on the newspapers and magazines that cluttered the floor, nearly knocking over the television, yelling, "Git it!" as they advanced, "Look out!" when they fell back trying to head off its attempts to escape.

I couldn't see it most of the time, as it was so quick and racing along the walls, mostly along the base of the couch on which I was cowering against the wall, dodging the skillet with which Earlene was apparently trying to keep the creature from leaping up on it.

They chased it around the trailer several times, stomping, banging and yelling. Finally, Mr. Gene staggered back with the twenty-two rifle he kept under his bed.

The rat was cowering in the corner nearest me, and when Mr. Gene fired the rifle - more a loud thud than the sharp crack television had led me to expect - it shrieked, a high-pitched squeal that will probably always echo through my worst nightmares.

"That'll learn ye, ye nasty motherfucker!" he crowed.

It was still jerking and squirming as he carried it gingerly by the tip of its tail to the door and tossed it out into the yard, then doubled over, gasping for breath, stumbled through the door and vomited on the flimsy little porch.

Though my grandmother almost always looked clean and well-groomed, she rarely showered - probably because she was extremely prudish and reluctant to muss her hair in that little closet of a shower. She had it professionally "done" every Thursday evening, swirled up into a heap of bleached-blonde curls, then plastered into a helmet with hair spray - which she lavishly renewed before venturing out into public.

Because it was important for her marginal employment that any hint of body odor be covered, she applied liberal doses of cologne - which, I assume, she acquired in the same manner as her medication. There were bottles of various fragrances strewn about the place, and I recall her saying in a hoity-toity voice and manner that one of them was "exclusive at Neiman-Marcus" - which I doubt she could ever have afforded.

The air in the trailer was already rank enough with cigarette smoke, rancid and scorched food, mildewed carpet and clothing. When she closed in on me in attempt to comfort me, adding her too-sweet odor to the acrid reek of cordite, my gag reflex already primed by Mr. Gene's retching into the kitchen sink, nearly made me throw up on her.

"'S alright, honey," she tried to reassure me in her most sugary voice - not what I needed on top of her maudlin pawing and cloying smell, "It won' hurt ye."

The heck it wouldn't! With their help, it had just made me pee my pants!

Though, fortunately, neither of them noticed. That miserable little couch had already been soaked with beer so many times that, if I had ever worked up the nerve to search its recesses, I would probably have found more mushrooms than coins.

I suppose I've been stalling, reluctant to tell you the hardest truth: My mother had abandoned me because she was in prison for selling drugs and her sexual services.

Mr. Gene claimed in several of his rants that he'd wasted nearly a hundred thousand dollars on her drug habit and legal defense. I had no idea of how much that was then and now doubt he was capable of keeping an

accurate account. He was probably exaggerating, using it as an excuse to treat me like he'd bought me - and I could certainly see how little he valued his other possessions. Or even his own body, mind and soul - if he had one.

I would make sure I was at a safe distance or able to make a quick get-away and, parroting my grandmother, shout defiantly, "*I* never asked you to! An' you never threw none of it at me!"

I imagine most boys, especially when they're very young, think their mother is beautiful. Mine actually was; she was voted "Most Beautiful" of her senior class of 1986 at Nicklesburg High - and, as evidence, you can find a full-page photo in that year's annual (year book).

Maybe being beautiful and popular made some things too easy and spoiled her, but I don't know enough about her to form an accurate assessment. Most of my memories of her are so dim and tattered they've probably become untrustworthy.

I can recall being in the back seat of a car, watching her touch up her makeup in the rearview mirror, light a cigarette, turn to tell me to stay in the car and keep the doors locked, saying she loved me.

I try to believe that, in her own limited way, she did. But she seemed to care a lot more about having a good time.

One good time led to another, then to an arrest for possession of cocaine. Another arrest led to a conviction. A second conviction for "possession with intent to distribute" and "solicitation" to a longer sentence…. The familiar sordid story of another victim of our society's "getting tough" in our so-called "war" on drugs. (But that's another story.)

My grandmother showed me a few snapshots of a young man - blond, blandly handsome, with bleary blue

eyes and a self-satisfied grin - named Michael, who she said was my father.

I couldn't see any resemblance to me until recently. And even now I'm doubtful, as I haven't seen those photos in over a decade, and early memories are too often unreliable. Sometimes, the more we review them, the more distorted they become.

Some people born out of wedlock - or whatever euphemism you prefer for bastards - want to find out about and even form bonds with their birth parents.

I suppose there are some advantages to knowing your genetic background, but, if I'm in line for something like Huntington's disease, I'd just as soon not know until it hits me. Besides, I can't imagine that a man who deserted a woman he got pregnant would be much worth knowing.

I suppose I owe my upright - some might say, uptight - character mostly to the way Mr. Alfred raised me, but partly because I've always been afraid if I gave in to any weakness it might get the better of me, as happened with my mother and grandmother.

On what would prove the most fortunate afternoon of my life, I was pretending to be absorbed with hauling loads of dirt in my truck. Mr. Alfred continued watching me for several minutes before suggesting, "Come on back t' the house, an' I'll git Ella Mae t' rustle ye up somethin t' eat."

My stubborn pride in my imagined self-sufficiency was, however, about all the sense of human dignity I had managed to hold onto. I was famished, but the prospect of going inside Mr. Edward's mansion was intimidating enough in itself, and the idea that I would thereby acknowledge his contribution to my welfare was more than my feeble self-esteem could bear.

His pretty daughter, Krystal, was only a year older, but she was worlds above. The wan smirk she gave me when she deigned to notice me seemed to say, I wish you'd spare me your embarrassing presence, you homely little pariah.

"I'd ruther not," I muttered.

"Suit y'rself."

He watched me push my truck around for a while, using his considerable experience and wisdom to come up with another approach. "Tell ye what then, doodlebug, how 'bout you gath'rin up the trash roun here.

"Git ye some o' them black plastic trash bags, an' keep the beer cans sep'ret. We c'n sell them. Then you an' me can have supper in my place. How bout hamboogers an' fried taters?"

My mouth flooded, and I had to keep my head down to hide my grin. Mr. Alfred had his own little wing with a separate entrance on the north end of his son's sprawling

house, which I could reach without drawing the attention of the other inhabitants. I didn't agree, but I was hooked.

I recognized that he meant to amuse and disarm me with his drawling down-home language, and I found his use of "burger" in one context and "booger" in another interesting. I already had a keen interest in language - mainly because I'd been corrected and ridiculed at school when I'd used the substandard English I usually heard.

My grandmother rarely used profanity, except with Mr. Gene in the heat of their more rancorous quarrels, and this alerted me to the unsuitability of many of his words.

The kindest names Mr. Gene had for me were "squirrel" and "puke". Though I hated his constant complaints and verbal abuse, I sometimes listened just to test my theory that he was incapable of completing a sentence without using at least one profane or obscene word.

I gathered up five black plastic garbage bags of assorted trash and three of aluminum cans, mostly Schlitz.

I took a bath in a horse trough, had another grape-jelly sandwich so I wouldn't dive into the food like a ravenous stray, and put on my best and cleanest shorts and T-shirt.

By the time I'd settled my haul on Mr. Alfred's porch my pride in achievement was giving way to my usual doubts. I knocked so timidly I doubted he'd heard me - hoped he hadn't so I could sneak off without having disturbed him.

I could hear the drone of television news, time stretching out as it usually does when we're anxious, and was on the verge of turning to sneak away, when the door opened.

"Why, Doodlebug," he exclaimed, "who'd'a thought they was that minny beer cans *in* Collin County?!" (The sale of alcohol was still illegal in most of our county.)

He was giving me a sample of his droll exaggeration, as well as the approval and encouragement he wisely surmised I craved.

I had experienced so little approval that I was embarrassed and a little wary.

My first grade teacher, Miss Montgomery, had given my tender ego a good mauling. I had done my best to please her, but I had been unable to attract and hold her attention in any way the least positive.

Unlike most of my classmates, I hadn't attended kindergarten. Local authorities were probably not even aware of my existence, and I suppose, if pressed, my so-called guardian could have claimed she was home-schooling me.

(The cell-mate who has the bunk below me was home-schooled, thoroughly indoctrinated with anti-government, anti-modern and anti-social right-wing religious ideology - and he's walking proof of its limitations.

He claims he had the right to take a pack of cigarettes because he'd already bought two packs and considered the "illegal" federal tax he'd paid on them enough to cover it.

One of my fellow inmates said, "He's so dumb he couldn't spell dog if you gave him the d and the g." Another added, "Unless you told him it's god spelled backwards.")

I'd picked up most of the alphabet and numbers from snatches of *Sesame Street* and other educational programs on PBS. I could spell dog, cat, and several other words by rote and had a general idea of how letters formed words.

But I was woefully lacking in the social skills and self-discipline required in a structured environment, and Miss

Montgomery, though a fervent believer in structure and discipline, had little skill in or patience for instilling them.

I can see now that her rigidity was probably caused by insecurity - with which I was well acquainted, though I couldn't imagine then that most adults also suffer from it.

Early in her teaching career she had found an adequate way to impose order in a classroom and stuck with it.

She was also stuck with middle-class expectations and prejudices. (I often wonder how any thinking person can believe the boloney about America being a classless society. Though it's not difficult to imagine why the more fortunate, especially right-wing politicians, want the rest of us to believe it.)

My dirty, worn, ill-fitting clothes and slap-dab grooming - or lack thereof - especially the ragged haircut my grandmother had whacked at while under the influence, definitely did not meet with her approval.

She had divulged to our class - unnecessarily, I still believe - those of us unfortunate enough to need subsidized lunches, which made eating in the cafeteria an even more unsavory experience than it might otherwise have been.

The lunchroom was low-ceilinged, poorly-lighted, always too warm and humid, the air heavy with the rarely-identifiable smell of the slop *du jour* and clamorous with children yelling, pushing, shoving . . .

I was accustomed to disorder, but not on such a scale. The food was nutritious enough - certainly far better than I got at "home" - but overcooked, bland, and plopped onto aluminum trays by scowling, sweaty women in dingy-gray uniforms and heavy hairnets. I was always hungry and wolfed down whatever was on my tray, eager for the

precious freedom I could grab in what remained of our lunch break.

I hadn't learned to empty my bladder before class resumed, and Miss Montgomery insisted on a half hour of quiet immediately after lunch.

Those who had attended kindergarten were probably accustomed to a nap or a period of imposed inactivity, but I was always restless, probably hyperactive from a diet of too much sugar and over-processed carbohydrates.

One day, as I tried to settle down, my bladder began to ache and I raised my hand for permission to go to the restroom.

"No, Trevor, I've told you often enough that this is our quiet time."

I did my best to hold it in, squirmed, crossed my legs, tried to concentrate on something else . . . until I was in such agony I raised my hand again. Miss Montgomery, who was patrolling among us, came up behind me, took a pinch of hair from the back of my head, yanked it hard, leaned over me and whispered fiercely, "I said, '*Quiet'*!"

Time crawled on, and I struggled, squirmed . . . but finally nature prevailed and, with sweet relief, my bladder emptied itself.

Was this in any way - not to mention the usual shape or form - Miss Montgomery's fault? Of course not. I was a naughty boy, unworthy even of verbal reprimand. She jerked me from my seat, dragged me through the mob of snickering classmates, out the door, and all but flung me at Mr. Bean, the surprised janitor who happened to be sweeping the hallway.

Mr. Bean was a small, thin, fragile old man well past the usual age of retirement. He'd obviously dealt with similar problems before, patiently led me to the restroom, then to

the first-aid station, where he gave me underwear and pants, better than those I'd wet.

For the next several weeks I was taunted with "pee pot", "piddler" and "puddles".

Miss Montgomery thereafter had a faint trace of disgust on her face whenever she looked at me.

Not long after that, one of my classmates, LeeAnn - who I now consider among my closest friends - beaming, in her usual lively manner, rhymed, "Dwight is quite bright, but Trevor is never clever."

I was wounded - I might as well admit, to tears - hurt all the more because I liked LeeAnn. She was so accustomed to approval that she wasn't aware she had slashed me to the quick.

Dwight was the smartest, best-looking, most popular boy in our class. Bright fit him perfectly. His eyes were clear blue, his well-groomed hair was pale blond, his mind was alert, quick and full of unsuspected knowledge - though he wasn't the least full of himself - and his smile was ready, open and irresistible. I wanted to hate him, but I couldn't.

As Mr. Alfred would remind me several times through the years: "The truth can hurt - sometimes more than the meanest lie." I was certainly never the least clever - too repressed, unsure of myself, afraid of disapproval to venture any show of intelligence, much less wit.

The best I could muster was a barely adequate approximation of detachment, a semblance of indifference you might buy if you weren't very observant or, like many people, willing to accept appearances.

When winter came that year, with its first blue norther, I was strangely elated and went running wild in the pasture behind the barn, racing with the excited horses, chasing

something elusive, possibly the outdoor freedom my body was telling me our cold, wet winters would restrict.

That exhilaration was soon squashed by Mr. Gene's usual sour contempt and my grandmother's stoned apathy. As I tried to get to sleep on the sofa, with that little trailer buffeted by gusts of north wind, a twinge in my left ear became an ache.

They were both, as usual, passed out drunk at the other end of cramped hovel, and I knew that waking Mr. Gene would be courting trouble. But I had never had an earache before, and trying to ignore it was no more successful than my earlier attempt to ignore my aching bladder. The pain insisted on my attention, dominated my consciousness, grew worse.

I tried to comfort myself by crying, as I'm sure I'd done often enough as a younger child, but unfortunately that only fueled my self-pity, and I let myself whimper louder, hoping to get the attention of my grandmother and any relief she might give. She was supposedly my caretaker, and she'd had experience with easing pain, as well as access to pain-relieving medication.

But Mr. Gene woke first and growled, "Shut that goddam brat up 'r git 'im outta here!"

When the memory of that night pops into my mind today, I usually laugh. It's a little like Jonathan Swift's proposal to solve the problem of Irish overpopulation and poverty by eating the unwanted babies.

This roused my grandmother, and she stumbled and lurched around the wind-jarred little trailer like a drunk in a sea storm, knocking things over, spilling packages out of the cabinet, fussing and grumbling like some lunatic travesty of Lady Macbeth's mad scene.

She finally found an aspirin, which she crammed into my mouth, then blew cigarette smoke into my ear. For all the good that did me, she might as well have blown it in the lower orifice often cited in similar contexts.

So she heated some cooking oil and poured it into my ear.

Boiling oil might not cure an earache, but it will certainly distract you - and very likely prevent future complaints.

After that I was too afraid of being cast out to complain about my only shoes, a pair of blue canvas Keds, hand-me-downs from Winston. Though my feet were ample for my age, they were a couple of sizes too large and flopped like clown shoes, adding to my self-consciousness.

When I arrived at school one morning with them sopping wet, squishing, smearing the floor with our heavy black mud, Miss Montgomery snurled her lip and demanded, "Don't you have anything but tennie runners?"

Even at her most unpleasant and demanding she was a kitten compared to Mr. Gene. With his recent threat still firmly in mind, I defied her, jutted my chin, stared up at her as hard as I could and asserted, "I *like* tennie runners."

Stubborn defiance - being "contrary", "mule-headed", "sullin' up like a possum", as Mr. Alfred would say - has remained my first line of defense, and one of my worst faults.

Mr. Alfred seemed to have recognized this from the start and knew how to either get around it or use it, like jujitsu, to his advantage.

The "hambooger" and limp fried "taters" remain among the most memorable meals I've ever had. I was so hungry - as much for his approval as for food - and so knotted up with anxiety that, though it was delicious and I chewed it

slowly and well, I was able to swallow it only with the help of tears and mucous.

Mr. Alfred pretended not to notice. We sat on his couch with TV trays in front of us, watching the PBS evening news. Though I don't have the least memory of what it was about, I have ever since felt a special affection for Jim Lehrer.

For the next several days I did my best to stay away from Mr. Alfred, afraid I would wear out my welcome or he might discover one of my many deficiencies. I caught myself crying several times, aching for food and his easy companionship, and scolded myself for being such a crybaby.

I finally relented as best my ornery pride would let me and played with my dump-truck in the shade of the barn. As I hoped, Mr. Alfred found me there.

I pretended to be absorbed in hauling the dirt from one pile to another, and Mr. Alfred pretended to be surprised to find me there. "Why, Doodlebug, I bin lookin f'r you. I got six bucks f'r them beer cans."

I shrugged, trying to pretend it didn't matter much. (Even if he had actually redeemed them, they were probably worth less.)

"I gotta run int' town t' pick me up some groc'ries. Wanna ride along?"

Did I?! I shrugged.

"No rush. Jus' mosey on over, if 'n' whin ye take a notion."

I waited until he was well on his way back to his place before I let myself stand, feigning resignation, in case he had eyes in the back of his head. I had a bar of soap in the barn, lathered myself all over, and rinsed off with a hose.

I had a reasonably clean T-shirt in the loft, so I didn't have to go into the trailer and face a grilling from Mr. Gene, which would've gone something like, "Where the goddam hell ye think you're goin, shitbird?" Followed by my fruitless pleading and his increasingly abusive refusal.

Mr. Alfred drove a 1984 Ford pickup, which he carefully maintained, and that first silent ride into town with him was almost thrilling, with the afternoon heat rushing into my face and the unobstructed view of the familiar countryside through the open window.

Free of the oppressive funk of Mr. Gene's trashed-up, air-conditioned Cadillac or the sticky, anxiety-fraught school bus, the landscape seemed transformed, charged with vitality, no longer entirely indifferent to me.

As we turned right off our two-lane farm-to-market blacktop onto the main street Mr. Alfred said, "How 'bout we stop off at the Dairy Queen an' have us a milkshake?"

Tears come to my eyes now as I recall my first vanilla milkshake, delicious beyond words.

"You prob'ly know it aint a good idea t' go groc'ry shoppin on a empty stomach."

Allowing I was probably already acquainted with an idea was another of his many ways of evading my defenses.

He still bought his groceries at Maynard's, on the west side of the main block of the downtown. It seemed like a huge store then, though it was small and cramped compared to the big-box chain stores that were already driving it out of business.

I had never, as far as I can recall, been inside anything larger than a quick-stop convenience store with my grandmother. Even that had been rare, because Mr.

Gene, who was either too drunk or too lazy to go in, usually insisted I would slow her down by whining for something.

Mr. Alfred held the door open for me, as though I was his guest, welcome and free to explore the store.

Mr. Maynard greeted him, smiled down at me. "Who's this young man?"

"Name's Trevor, but I call 'im Doodlebug."

Mr. Maynard sensed my bewilderment, gave me a genuinely friendly grin and extended his hand. "Nice t' meet ye, Trevor."

I gave him my grubby little paw, was surprised by the soft warmth of his hand, the first I'd ever touched in such a manner, then followed Mr. Alfred, who took a cart and pushed it along his invariable route, starting with the left-side wall, along which were personal-care items, with medications and toiletries on the counter on the right side of the aisle. He hadn't started making a list yet, but scanned the shelves, letting his still-strong memory remind him if he needed something.

I was already floating in Eden when he asked, "See anything ye need, Doodlebug?"

In his presence, with my stomach full of a vanilla milkshake, I didn't feel any need, but I wanted everything I saw, even a box of one of the laundry detergents displayed in impressive order. But he was surely only teasing.

He greeted the man behind the refrigerated case of the meat counter, Mac, who was too busy slicing lunch meat for another customer to notice me - for which I was grateful. He made a U-turn and headed back up the aisle of canned goods, a cornucopia of unimaginable abundance, then condiments in a variety that far exceeded the glimpses I'd caught on television.

But it was the next aisle, with boxes of cereal, cartoon characters beckoning me to join them in fun, and, beyond, a fantasy-land of cookies, the aroma of ginger snaps so alluring my mouth watered and I became light-headed - probably hyperventilating with excitement.

"Ye c'n have a box o' cookies," Mr. Alfred offered. "If ye promise t' eat all y'r good food firs'."

I took a box of ginger snaps with trembling hands, resisting the urge to hug it to my chest, faint with its enticing aroma and the wonder of possessing it, all but bursting with gratitude and affection for Mr. Alfred, the kindest, most generous human being I'd ever encountered.

He chuckled, took the box from me and dropped it into the basket. Thus began my education in proper nutrition. Cookies only after dinner, after which I was patiently coached to brush my teeth, with my own brand-new bright orange toothbrush.

When I paused, gazing longingly at the display of chips and dips, Mr. Alfred said, "Sorry, Doodlebug, not on my watch. Just look at what junk food's doin t' Winnie the Poot."

I snorted with amusement, though I was a little disappointed to hear him speak derisively of his grandson. I already pitied Winston, had possibly even begun to recognize that food was a substitute for the love he was denied or failed to deserve - and that hint of his disapproval helped reinforce my resolve to do my best never to disappoint Mr. Alfred.

Later, I was gently denied junk television. "I caint let ye watch crap on my watch, Doodlebug."

I pondered how a word could mean paying attention to, a small timepiece adults wore on their wrists, and something somehow required of Mr. Alfred, as though

some higher authority was directing him - and, I suppose, in a way, there was: some assumption of what was best for me.

For me! What an amazing idea: somebody actually considered me worth thought and effort! Too good to be true. Couldn't possibly last.

For the next couple of weeks, every time I visited him, with my heart pounding in my throat as I approached his door, I would promise myself I wouldn't stay more than a few minutes, would be attentive and polite, refrain from returning too soon . . .

I can see now that I had found my first home - not in his tidy, comfortable apartment, but in his undemanding acceptance, kind and generous presence, indulgent but wise guidance.

I was still wary, reluctant to accept this as real and potentially lasting, because I was afraid - never of him - but of the probability that I would do something that would displease him and cause him to lose interest in me.

As you've surely learned, being interested in someone is a good way of gaining and holding their interest.

I knew I had found much-needed sustenance with Mr. Alfred, of course, but, more important, I found him entertaining. I could see that he used his good-humored, down-to-earth manner and language to disguise his considerable intelligence, experience, wisdom and impressive store of knowledge. Though it would be some years before I recognized that he felt it behooved him to do so because our culture is so often contemptuous of intelligence and indifferent to wisdom.

Every day brought something new, casually tossed on what had already become my end of the brown leather couch. One day it was a book, *One Fish, Two Fish*, then

most of Dr. Seuss, which he had me read to him, patiently helping sound the words I hadn't yet learned to recognize.

Miss Montgomery was a committed believer in the "whole language" approach to literacy, impatient with any failure to recognize a word. Mr. Alfred had been taught phonetics, and he would patiently guide me through the complexity of written English, letting me discover for myself, with occasional gentle reminders, the various sounds that a letter might produce, chuckling at my characteristic resistance to inconsistencies.

Sometimes he would explain that English had probably once sounded more like its currently spelled. Sometimes, with good-humored modesty, he would admit he didn't have an explanation - which was a refreshing change from the dogmatic responses of Mr. Gene and Miss Montgomery, and Earlene's apathetic ignorance.

One day there were three striped T-shirts, their bright colors delectable as candy, hardly worn, freshly laundered, ironed and carefully folded - by Ella Mae, I knew. I sat there with them on my bare knees, wondering how I could preserve them.

I would hide them in the loft and never let them fall into Earlene's hands to be slovenly thrown into an over-loaded washer at the Laundry-Mat, corrupted by the colors bleeding from the jumble of other clothes.

The shirts were more hand-me-downs from Winston; at ten he was already well on his way to the morbid obesity that was becoming epidemic in America. He spent most of his time withdrawn in his bedroom, playing video games, snacking on chips, cookies and other junk food.

His skin was pasty from too little exercise and almost no exposure to the sun, his cheeks already so bloated you couldn't make out his jaw-line, and there were little dimples

beneath his dull eyes, which were darkened like those of a middle-age woman who worked too much and slept too little. Just the thought of him triggered distaste and pity, and I suppose I was somewhat frozen by a welter of emotions.

"Well, try one on," Mr. Alfred prompted.

The shirt swallowed me, its hem falling almost to my knees, its short sleeves to my elbows.

"You be stylin," he assured me.

Inner-city African-American language and style were becoming fashionable even in Nicklesburg, a small town that had once served the simple needs of farmers and ranchers, now becoming a bedroom community for metropolitan Dallas, being engulfed by the urban sprawl.

Those T-shirts felt more protective than the worn, faded, outgrown shirts I'd had to wear until then. I took to the look immediately - and it's surely ironic that I was introduced to it by a man who was, at least on the surface, as conventional and conservative as the average heartland farmer.

Even when Krystal, with her perpetual cool smirk, would comment disdainfully, "That's one of Winston's old shirts," I managed to hold onto the growing self-esteem Mr. Alfred was subtly building in me.

As I became more secure, my self-consciousness began to give way to a greater awareness of others, of their limitations and insecurities.

I would eventually recognize that Krystal's need to feel superior grew, at least in part, from her insecurity - that her constant disapproval had probably helped drive Winston away from human contact - and I was determined I wouldn't let it have a similar effect on me.

But I'm getting ahead of myself again.

Another memorable event from those early days with Mr. Alfred was my first formal haircut. One Saturday morning he took me into town to J.D.'s Barber Shop, on the side street just off the southeast corner of the downtown block.

There was still a faded red-and-white striped pole in a dust-clouded glass cylinder, once turned by a motor, which announced both the presence and vanishing of such an institution.

Inside, the first thing that hit me was the cloying smells of the various oils and tonics along one wall and three big elaborate chairs on posts - though only one was manned, by J.D,, who was approaching eighty at least, pale and frail, with big liver spots on his forehead and bony but still-capable hands.

There were half a dozen older men sitting in the dozen available chairs, most casually reading a newspaper or magazine, engaged in casual conversation. All looked up to greet Mr. Alfred, who after returning their greetings, said to the barber, "I thought ye might c'd do somethin with this lad's hair."

He indicated that I should take a seat, sparing me an introduction and the use of his embarrassing nickname.

I was at first so preoccupied with the echoing and receding images in the opposing mirrors that filled each side of the little shop that I hardly noticed the men, who seemed to take little interest in me. Only later would I realize that they had come more to socialize than to get their hair trimmed.

Mr. Alfred had his short, almost entirely gray hair cut once a week, but he otherwise paid little attention to it, never grooming it, even for church.

I was trying to follow the conversation, which was about Bill Clinton and the various accusations leveled against him. Most of the men seemed to like Bill, but they were generally displeased with his improprieties - though several insisted that most of the charges were politically motivated.

One especially good-humored man, who I later learned was Nolan Barnett, one of Mr. Alfred's oldest and closest friends, seemed delighted by his antics, which he claimed were common in politicians. "Ye know how t' tell when a politician's lyin?" he asked rhetorically. "Lips 're movin."

Mr. Alfred chuckled obligingly, obviously having heard the old joke before.

When he'd finished with the customer in his chair, the barber placed a padded board across its arms, looked at me and said, "Hop on up here, young man."

I was the only person in the shop under seventy, and I didn't doubt for a moment he meant me, but I froze.

"Go on now, son," Mr. Alfred urged.

I clambered up to a dizzying height that, with my disconcerted flush, the apron thrown over me, and the actual heat gathered toward the ceiling, became truly a "hot seat".

The barber wrapped a narrow strip of paper around my neck and tightened the apron, causing a surge of anxiety so overwhelming I would probably have lost my breakfast if I hadn't been distracted by my stricken face receding in ever-diminishing images in the mirror across from me.

"What ye want done with this?" the barber asked, a hank of my unruly hair already lifted in his comb, scissors poised to clip.

I looked to Mr. Alfred for an answer.

"It's your hair, Trevor," he insisted, "Tell the man how ye want it cut."

"Short," I croaked.

"Flat-top, maybe," one of the men suggested.

Every eye in the shop was on me. I had never, except for the pant's wetting episode, had so much attention, and this was more excruciating, as there seemed to be no possibility of escape.

"Nope," the barber vetoed, "double cowlick in front and one in back."

"What color you call that hair?" one man asked.

I didn't call it any color, though I knew it was probably considered blond - though not pale and silky like Dwight's. Earlene would probably have called it "dishwater".

"At the drug store, it'd prob'ly be called somthin like medium ash blond," the barber responded.

Mr. Barnett contended, "That's oughtabin."

"You mean auburn?" another countered, "That aint auburn."

"Naw, I mean oughtabin," Mr. Barnett insisted, "Oughtabin on a monkey's butt."

Laughter erupted and engulfed me, spurred on by the stricken look on my face - more raucous than any I'd ever experienced, amplified by my distress. I would probably have burst into tears if my eyes hadn't met Mr. Alfred's and found the mirth he shared with his friends, the gentle approval and reassurance I would almost always find there. Then, as though a membrane burst, I found myself laughing with them.

On our way back to the country, with the warm wind pleasantly refreshing on my newly-bared scalp, I found myself smiling, realizing that the men had laughed more at the disconcerted expression on my face - which I can still see receding into infinity in the mirrors - than at the corny joke.

Later, I would recognize that I had been subjected to a sort of initiation, their laughter welcoming me, tacitly accepting my relationship with Mr. Alfred. Reflecting on that experience, I would learn to appreciate the curative power of laughter.

Eventually, with Mr. Alfred's encouragement, I would find the liberation in being able to laugh at myself.

One day, as July blazed lazily into August, Mr. Alfred said, "How 'bout you 'n' me movin back t' my ol' place, Doodlebug?"

His old house was about a mile east of his son's fine new stone-and-brick mansion, deeper in the country, a small faded-white wood-frame house obscured behind two ancient cedar trees and a weed-choked yard, shaded by huge old pecan trees, forlorn and a little spooky.

"It aint much, but it's gotta be better 'n a barn 'r that filthy trailer-house."

I didn't doubt this was a serious proposition, but I'd become accustomed to my present sense of independence - and was insufficiently aware of how much of it he was providing - so my immediate reaction to any proposed change was the usual human resistance, reinforced by obstinacy.

"Aint no rush. Mull it over a few days."

I'd had very little contact with those living through a closed door in the much larger part of the house and had caught nothing of any possible conflict between Mr. Alfred and his son. Mr. Edward seemed to be gone most of the time.

Though he never even hinted at it, I surmised that there was little love lost between Mr. Alfred and his daughter-in-law. I couldn't imagine Krystal being the least affectionate toward anyone, including her grandfather, and I knew Winston rarely left his bedroom.

I was socially isolated, but, probably because I'd known little else, I hadn't yet formed a clear conception of loneliness. I'm probably still more comfortable with solitude

than the average human being - and being constantly in close proximity to so many strangers, some of them potentially dangerous, as I write this makes me yearn to be alone outside.

A day or two later Mr. Alfred continued his low-key attempt to persuade me. "Nolan don't pick no bones 'bout not bein comterble here.

"An' Jack won't hardly come neither. Won't stay more 'n a couple o' minutes when 'e does."

Jack - Mr. Taylor, as I've always called him - was our bus driver, as well as a custodian at the high school, a tall, muscular man, so easy-going, gentle and patient I rarely considered his potential strength. Though I always made my way to the middle of the bus, I never doubted that he would come to my rescue if one of the bigger boys picked on me.

He and Mr. Alfred had been friends since Mr. Taylor was a small child. Mr. Alfred was more than a decade older, but he'd taken the younger boy under his wing because Mr. Taylor's father had run off with another woman, leaving his wife and four children in dire poverty. Despite the differences in their age and social status, they had remained close.

"Won't say why," Mr. Alfred continued after what he would have called a spell. "Wouldn', o' course."

Mr. Taylor's workdays when school was in session probably lasted from before sun-up until nearly dark in the winter, but, with school recessed for the summer, he had more free time.

"Caint help but s'spec' Eddy 'r that daughter-'n-law o' mine 's bin rude to 'im. Kids 're rude t' ever'body, so he wouldn' take no umbrage there."

Krystal and Winston didn't ride the bus to school; their mother, Mis Victoria, drove them. (By this time I had become acquainted with Ella Mae and adopted her names for the Fields. Local African-American "domestics" still use such forms of address, and I have never considered myself in any way superior to Ella Mae.)

One evening I felt obliged to pay a visit to my grandmother. I stood on the rickety little porch outside the trailer and listened to make sure there wasn't a ruckus in progress, heard nothing but the usual TV jabber, knocked more boldly than usual, then went in to face the usual.

"We-ell, if it aint little Lord Fauntleroy," Mr. Gene drawled.

I didn't have the slightest idea who he was referring to, but I knew well enough that he was displeased with the recent improvement in my appearance and self-confidence.

Later I would recognize that he had fallen into the unconscious habit of exerting power over me, finding some pathetic gratification in depriving me of self-respect because he'd sacrificed his own to alcohol and sloth.

Eventually, I would fit this into a recognition of one of our specie's most deplorable and nearly universal weaknesses: the tendency to try to enhance our own self-esteem at the expense of others.

"Now don't start pickin on 'im," Earlene mumbled, as though she had a mouthful of peanuts. "Come 'ere, darlin'."

"Pamper y'r little sweetie-pie all ye fuckin want," Mr. Gene growled, "I gotta take a shit." (I never have figured out why so many men feel that being crude makes them

seem manlier.) After a few attempts, he managed to get to his feet and lurch to the fetid little bathroom.

Earlene tried to pull me onto her lap, but I felt too mature and independent for one of her clumsy cuddles and stiffly took a seat beside her on that clammy little couch.

"We aint seen much o' you lately," she cooed, as though I'd caused her serious concern.

I sat erect at the edge of the couch, pretending to be attentive to whatever was on the screen in front of us.

"That ol' man aint molestin you, is 'e?" Her voice was nauseatingly sweet with phony solicitude.

I thought she was accusing Mr. Alfred of being physically abusive, and I was angry and disgusted that she could imagine he, who was only a few years older and considerably more vigorous than his obnoxious brother, was similarly a bully, physically, verbally or emotionally abusive.

I understand now that she believed it her duty to instill shame about sex. She couldn't escape the shame instilled in her by her poor-but-proud working-class environment.

I don't recall ever feeling innocent, though, like most kids, I'd learned the value of pretending to be. I'd never had any friends or playmates and was too timid to even have some older boy whisper dirty misinformation to me on a playground, I was almost entirely ignorant about sex.

The stash of tawdry pornography she called "filthy magazines" under Mr. Gene's didn't give me a better understanding. I had of course sneaked looks at these and found them disturbing, my perception colored by her scorn, as well as my loathing of Mr. Gene, who I had seen masturbating with one in hand.

Though I have since seen little pornography and know very little about it, it seems to me that many men actually find pleasure in debasing women. And in retrospect, I have to suppose their relationship was based in part on his need to feel powerful, and her willingness to remain dependent. Their behavior was hardly favorable to my forming healthy feelings about sex.

One particular experience, one of my most searing memories, can still scald.

Shortly after my fifth birthday I had my first ordeal with chiggers (red bugs). Several had burrowed into my scrotum and foreskin, and the itch produced by my body's reaction to their anticoagulant was intense.

I did my best not to, in Earlene's coy phrase, "play with myself", but the itch was irresistible, and I scratched my tender genitals raw - which, of course, not only made the irritation worse, but caught her otherwise-oblivious attention.

Inspecting that unsightly part of my anatomy, "Chiggers!" was her disgusted diagnosis, and the remedy she produced was Purex. If that hadn't been handy, she might have used gasoline.

Full-strength chlorine bleach will certainly kill a tiny arachnid, and it definitely put an end to the itch, but yow! I hope you can imagine something of what I felt when that potent liquid was applied to my tender flesh.

I howled and danced around in such a frenzy that Mr. Gene got up from his nap to investigate. He found it well worth his time and trouble, was highly amused, especially by my erection. "Doodness dwacious," he jeered in mocking baby-talk, "such a big fuss about such a wittle wee-wee!"

Adding insult to injury, would be putting it much too mildly! My hatred of him, already intense, was incandescent in that moment, and, after all these years, I can still taste the bitterness of his deliberate humiliation.

But back to that decisive evening:

Though I didn't yet know the word for it, I was, of course, already well acquainted with hypocrisy. How could any intelligent and observant seven-year old American not be? But it would take me years to recognize that her accusation arose from her reluctance to admit to herself that she was neglecting me.

She didn't have the emotional strength and integrity to attend to her own well-being, much less to mine. And eventually I was able to forgive her.

In that moment, however, I could barely control my anger, and I answered defiantly, "No ma'am, he aint!"

I left, closing the door firmly, vowing never to open it again. And I never did.

That night my decision was clinched by a nightmare of a rat on chest. In what could only have been a dream, it had leapt down from a rafter above me. I woke in terror, yelling and batting at it, scrambling to escape, and as it fled its tail lashed across my cheek and lips. This was surely more dream than reality, but the rat seemed so palpable I'm still uncertain about its actual existence.

I've given this considerable thought through the years, and, with what I've since learned about the behavior of rats, I have to admit it was probably all a dream. Possibly, my mind had linked that disturbing event when Mr. Gene shot a rat with a story one of my classmates had told about finding a cat on her baby brother's chest trying to suck his breath away.

She had spoken in a breathless voice, her eyes wide, doing her best to convince us she was telling a grave truth.

I would later realize that her ignorance and superstition, all too common among us, had been further intensified by the hysterical atmosphere of the fundamentalist church she attended. In order to hold onto and reinforce her belief in demonic forces, rather than accept her own unacceptable impulses, she needed us to share her terror and conviction.

I was gasping for breath as I woke in a panic, and I can still feel that rat on my bare chest as I write this. I felt so contaminated I had to wash myself in one of the horse troughs. I soaped and rinsed my face, neck and chest several times, but my skin still crawled with loathing, so I stripped and lathered my entire body, getting soap in my eyes and mouth.

Even after I had rinsed myself thoroughly with the hose and flushed my mouth several times, I was still much too filled with revulsion to consider returning to my pallet in the loft.

I now believe my unconscious mind, wiser and more committed to my well-being than my stubborn conscious will, created that nightmare to convince me Mr. Alfred's old house was better than the rat-haunted loft.

I waited until the sun was well up, then walked as calmly as I could across the pasture to Mr. Alfred's. As I expected, he was reading the *Dallas Morning News.*

He was smiling as he opened the door, pleased to see me, as I'd hoped. "Mornin, Doodlebug."

"Mornin, Mr. Alfred," I managed casually enough.

He sat back down and resumed his reading, probably wondering what had brought me at such an early hour,

but, as he would so often through the coming years, waiting patiently.

I had thought of little else for the last several hours, trying to find words most like I thought he himself might use. I took a deep breath, trying to make sure I had my voice under control. "I've mulled it over, Mr. Alfred."

He glanced up at me to assure me I had his attention and resumed his reading.

I took another breath, still struggling to calm my trembling voice. (I can see now that I was at a momentous impasse, that anxiety is natural and even practical at such times, that I was still in the grip of that nightmare and the risk my grandmother had insinuated.) "An' I'd be glad t' move t' your ol' house."

He smiled up at me, his pale blue eyes twinkling through his reading glasses a moment, took them off, folded and slipped them into the bib pocket of his overalls, neatly refolded the paper and laid it on top of the stack beside him on the couch. "Well sir, then we better hop to it b'fore it gits too hot."

I had passed the abandoned old house on the bus on my way to school every morning. Especially on rainy days, I'd thought of it as gloomy, possibly even haunted.

That impression had been somewhat relieved by the ebullience of younger African-American boy who waited for the bus there and would clamber up the steps calling, "Mahnin, Mistah Taylah!" If it was raining hard, he would dash out from under the bigger cedar tree and scramble up the steps yelling "Oooee!"

From the road, in the stark summer light, engulfed by ragged, dust-covered weeds, it looked too deserted and time-worn to seem mysterious. The front windows were broken, and, behind the haggard screens and shattered glass, the remains of yellowed shades hung in tatters.

We pulled into the oval of driveway at the side of the house, paved, like the road itself with caliche, a whitish mixture of rock and clay Mr. Alfred called creek gravel. It was mostly free of grass and weeds because people would turn around in it or park there when the unimproved dirt road that leads on south was impassible due to heavy rains. And couples would pull into the relative seclusion to make out and have sex.

As I got out of the truck I nearly stepped on a condom plump with semen. It looked like big white slug, and I was so ignorant I examined it more closely.

Mr. Alfred chuckled indulgently. "That's what the Navy called a prophylactic. Sign at the liberty desk said, 'Better safe than sorry.' My mate Sammy called 'em 'rubber raincoats'."

From the longer east side, the old house seemed more substantial, the driveway stretching on after its left turn

back onto the road south into the tall single-car garage that lists to the right as though pushed by the lean-to truck shed connected to it. To its left there was a huge old hackberry tree and beyond it a chicken coop - or henhouse, as Mr. Alfred called it.

To the right of the garage, across an open yard, is a sturdier structure I'd never noticed before, the joined wash-shed and smoke-house - "warshéd" and "smokouse", as Mr. Alfred pronounced them - connected to the back door side of the house by a raised concrete sidewalk, with a well and squat pump house nestled against the east side of the house.

Mr. Alfred stood there for what seemed several minutes, preparing himself, I sensed, for what lay inside.

I followed him through the rasping weeds across the front yard. The front steps were so dilapidated by age and neglect that we had to be careful negotiating them. Across the left side, from the overhang to the balustrade of the porch, a spider had rigged a web like those often associated with Halloween, and the spider itself - the largest I'd ever seen - was lurking there, patiently predatory.

I shied away, but Mr. Alfred assured me, "It won't hurt ye, Doodlebug. That's a good spider, a golden garden."

If he'd taken it as a good omen, he soon found himself sadly mistaken. Behind the torn screen door, the front door stood open, every one of its dozen small glass panes bashed through.

Inside, the furniture was wrecked, the couch and chairs slashed, gaping wounds spilling entrails of stuffing, the coffee and end tables smashed flat and splintered.

"Why, them little shitasses!" Mr. Alfred fumed, "They better hope I never git my han's on 'em. I'd kick their sorry, no-good asses from here t' Waxahachie!"

I had to cover my mouth to stifle a laugh; the horror of the damage, Mr. Alfred's dismay, the idea of this kind old gentleman kicking anyone, much less all the way to a town with a funny name was so overwhelming that, as people will sometimes say of such experiences, I didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

I could have wailed in protest, but recognized that my astonishment, anger and grief were insignificant compared to Mr. Alfred's. The house in which he'd been born, had grown up, lived his married life, raised his son to success and prosperity - a lifetime of memories, valued objects . . . reduced to shambles by malicious boys.

I never doubted the gender or approximate age of whoever had wreaked such wanton destruction.

He sighed. "Well, there aint nothin we c'n do, Doodlebug, but git on with it."

I followed him as he picked his way through the dismaying wreckage, through the wide double-doorway into the dining room, which hadn't been so badly smashed, its massive old oval table and buffet more resistant to the assault, the violence possibly beginning to wane, much insane rage and delight in destruction already spent earlier in the rampage.

Mr. Alfred stood in the kitchen doorway, with his fists on his hips, surveying the damage. "It's one thing t' take somebody else's belongin's 'cause you need 'em - 'r only jus' want 'em - but it's a whole nother thang t' smash 'em up jus' f'r the puredee meanness of it."

The kitchen was a complete shambles, cabinets open, their former contents scattered, jars of canned fruit and

vegetables hurled against the walls, their dried remains and shards of glass still clinging there in arrested slide, the counter and floor littered with broken dishes, battered pots and pans, chairs broken against the walls or over the table.

The door of the old refrigerator was open, but, though battered, it had withstood the assault. The sturdy old stove, under the debris, was undamaged except for a few chips in its white enamel. The old gray Formica table was also still intact, though the remains of broken chairs and shattered dishes littered it. Almost miraculously, it seemed to me, three of the four closed windowpanes above the sink were unbroken.

The back door onto the porch, though damaged, was still locked, and, through the doorway to the right, the back bedroom had been ransacked, its curtains pulled down, Venetian blinds torn at, two of them fanning down from one cord. The big square mirror of the dresser had been smashed, its drawers pulled out, their contents thrown on the floor in such a jumble that I could barely make out the floor itself, and Mr. Alfred slipped and had to catch himself on the plundered chest of drawers.

But the mattress hadn't been attacked, and the damage wasn't nearly as extensive as that of the living room and kitchen.

Down the hallway, the cedar chest was open, its old hand-made quilts flung about, some ripped. The bathroom was strewn with towels, toiletries smashed in the bathtub, the mirror of the medicine cabinet shattered by a single hurled bottle of Listerine, its shards and the dried remains of its dark urine-yellow contents filling the lavatory below it.

Further down the hall, the front bedroom looked dark and dismal, but it hadn't suffered much substantial

damage, its darkness due to drawn still-intact shades, behind which the windows remained unbroken.

"Looks like they run out o' steam by the time they hit your bedroom, Doodle."

I stood in the doorway, in the still aftermath of all the destruction I'd seen, barely able to breathe, the air too close, heavy with dust and the stale must of long abandonment, brown rain-stained wall paper sagging from the ceiling, corners clotted with spider webs, my body numbed by disappointment and revulsion, my mind dragged down, as though by some dark whirlpool into an overwhelming sense of futility.

My own dreamed-of room had turned out an oppressive nightmare. I'd traded my airy loft for suffocating gloom!

Mr. Alfred left me, and I stood there, my ears ringing, numb with despondency for what seemed several minutes, until I became aware him rummaging through the wreckage in the dining room.

The vandals had broken the round mirror of the dresser - *my* dresser! - and I hated them fiercely, hoped the old superstition about breaking mirrors would prove true and retribution would flood down on them in a deluge of torment.

Then, as though the torrent of my despair and hatred, like the fury of the vandals, had exhausted itself, I found myself again becoming aware of how much harder all this surely was for Mr. Alfred, felt the lash of self-reproach, then the resurgence of my ever-reliable defiance.

He was the kindest, gentlest, most generous man I'd ever known, and he deserved so much better than this. I had said I would live with him here, and I would find the

strength and resolve to stick with him, plow on beside him through the wreckage.

I joined him in the dining room, where he was leafing through a ragged old photo album, and, without even glancing at me, sensing my presence, he said, "How 'bout we jus' close off these two rooms f'r now? We aint gonna be doin no innertainin inny time soon."

I had the feeling his mind had gone back to the homelier language spoken at the time of the faded photographs he was gazing at, was lingering there. Then he sighed, closed the album and set off for the kitchen.

I followed him.

"See if you caint fish the key out from under that icebox, Doodle."

The shortening of my nickname by that one syllable seemed to signify a promotion, and, as though my growing sense of capability was strengthened by this, I knew exactly what to do. Amid the wreckage an old wooden yardstick seemed to bring itself to my attention, and within seconds I'd brought the key out from under the refrigerator, its dull silver gleaming like a magic object in some grim fairy tale.

It would be a couple of years before I would discover that those dark and often dreadful tales - so much like that first experience of the battered old house - were actually called Grimm, and I've never been able to completely untangle the two words and the memory of that "skeleton" key suddenly revealed, gleaming softly, almost magically, in the midst of dust and debris.

Miss Montgomery had read us "Rumpelstiltskin" and the image of that grotesque dwarf dancing insanely in triumphant possession of that helpless baby still haunts me through a tangle of nightmares it provoked.

I don't recommend reading that harrowing tale to first graders, but I must admit the intense experience of hearing Miss Montgomery reading it, her voice casting a malignant spell, gripped my attention, fueled my imagination, whetted my appetite for books, and probably even somehow partly prepared me for the cruel reality in which I'd found myself.

I've always found dreams fascinating, and even nightmares can be intriguing, more interesting than the oblivion of dreamless sleep - though oblivion can be a welcome respite.

With that key we unlocked the door onto the porch, which hadn't been attacked, though pale dust had sifted through the screens, and spiders had made themselves at home. In one corner, under a coat of dust, spider webs and insect carcasses, was the homely old rocking-chair in which Mr. Alfred would so often sit reading through the coming years.

There were buzzings, like little electric engraving devices, and several shiny black wasps darting lazily about. When I ducked one, Mr. Alfred chuckled and assured me it was only a "dirtdobber", that it wouldn't sting me unless I tried to trap it, and, even then, it wasn't much of a sting - nothing to compare with a yellow jacket.

With all that work ahead of us, he took the time to point out their nests in the corners between the walls and ceiling, took a broom hanging on a nail and gouged one loose with its handle so he could show me the little cylindrical chambers of dried mud in which they enclose their eggs with paralyzed spiders on which the hatched larvae feed.

He unlatched the screened door and we went down the sturdy back steps and followed the concrete sidewalk - which is impressively solid and high off the ground, though

not as wide as those usually found in towns - to the wash shed, which has a concrete floor and is open on the east side, and the smoke house.

Mr. Alfred had the key to a heavy padlock, which had prevented entry. There is a large window on the south side, so maybe the vandals hadn't investigated, were more interested in wreaking destruction than making off with the loot inside.

The room, with a wooden floor raised nearly two feet off the ground, had once been used to smoke, cure and store meat, mostly pork, and a faint smell of it still seemed to linger, though it was then, as now, used as a storeroom, where Mr. Alfred kept most of his tools, various hardware, an old saddle and several bridles, a big old trunk - a treasure trove I would spend many pleasant hours exploring in rainy weather.

We took a big grain scoop, a garden rake, two hoes and a big plastic garbage can and went back inside the house to rake and scoop up the debris. We would fill the container with as much as the two of us could carry, take it out to the truck and dump it in the bed.

About noon, Mr. Taylor drove up in his truck and came in through the back door carrying a basket covered with a towel, grinning and joshing, "I've warned ye 'bout that temper o' y'rs, Alfred." He winked at me. "I hope you learned to git outta 'is way right quick when 'e gits riled up, Trevor."

I knew he was being humorous, because, though he was generally a man of few words, I'd always heard him speak more nearly standard English. But Mr. Alfred didn't seem the least amused. "If all ye come t' do is criticize, Jack Taylor, I'd jus' soon ye mosey on along."

"Why, lookie here what I done brung ye." Mr. Taylor produced a large roll of duct tape from the basket, "The handies' invention o' this *ent*ire cents'ry."

Mr. Alfred kept his deadpan expression. "But can ye eat it?"

"Naw sir, prob'ly not. But Lucille sent along some stuff ye can. Well, if'n ye aint too p'rtic'lir."

Mr. Alfred laughed, and I joined them, entertained by their drawling good-ol'-boy routine and suddenly ravenous, as I'd had nothing to eat that morning, thinking the food couldn't be much worse than what they served in the lunchroom.

It turned out that Mrs. Taylor is in fact an excellent cook, admired for her fried chicken, potato salad and "Arsh p'tata" cake, which we had at a rickety old picnic table out under the big pecan tree in the back yard.

(It would be several years before I caught on to the local country pronunciation of Irish and some years more to realize why people of mostly Scottish descent associated the common potato, native to the New World, with that green island.)

After lunch we carried out several more loads of trash, the men carrying the container between them, me tagging along with a few token pieces. Then Mr. Alfred drove the truck, with me permitted to ride in the open bed, slowly along a dusty dirt road that gradually vanished into tall Johnson grass, deep into the flat prairie to a "warsh", a gully cut in the deep black soil by rain, where old discarded appliances had been dumped in order to impede erosion, with more trash disposed of on top of the rusting carcasses.

That seemed to me a reasonable solution to both problems at the time, and that expanse of homely flat

prairie didn't seem much marred by the mounds of trash that nature was slowly engulfing and digesting.

When we arrived back at the house, Mr. Taylor suggested we park closer to the back door.

Mr. Alfred said, "Now, why didn't I think o' that b'fore?"

"'Cause you done let y'rself git lazy an' soft in the head," Mr. Taylor answered matter-of-factly.

"That's why I hooked up with Doodle here. He aint lazy an' he's got a noggin hard as ary mule I ever come across."

I knew mules were reputed to be stubborn, which I had been called before - without all that much justification, as far as I could yet see.

We had finished clearing the trash in the kitchen and front bedroom, and I was folding quilts and replacing them in the cedar chest when I heard, "Oooee! Look like a tornada done hit!", then, "Hush, Lyn Charles"

I recognized the first voice as that of the small dark boy who had waited in the front yard and scrambled onto the bus with disarming enthusiasm and the second as Ella Mae.

"You shoulda seen it this mornin, Lyn Charles," Mr. Alfred said.

"We come t' help, Mr. Alfred," Ella Mae said.

"I appreciate it," Mr. Alfred answered.

"After all you do f'r us, Mr. Alfred, it aint nothin' f'r me t' help *you* out a little."

"Let me at it!" Lyn Charles dashed down the hall, nearly running into me, his face inches from mine, bright even in the gloom, "I know you. You Trevor."

"I call him Doodle," Mr. Alfred said.

I didn't mind him using that nickname with only adults present, but with another child, especially one younger

and inferior - racism having already left its impression - it sounded too much like doodoo, too reminiscent of "puddles".

"Doodle?!" Lyn Charles blurted, covering his mouth, making a token show of trying to stifle his giggle.

I gave him one of my sternest glares, turned and retreated into my bedroom. He followed, and I asserted, "This is *my* room."

"Aint you a lucky dawg?!" He slipped past me. "Le's open up them windas." He pulled down a shade, and it snapped up all the way to the top like magic, his eyes suddenly large and luminous in the late afternoon sunlight.

I was nearly as astonished as he was, and I thought for a moment he was going to burst into tears - but it was his usual laughter.

I couldn't resist it – and still can't.

We soon had all the shades up and all the windows open, propped up with sticks because the ropes holding the counterweights had been worn out by use and age. The room looked a lot more promising.

L.C., as I would call him through the coming years, ducked into the closet, which was too dark and oppressively over-filled for me - just the sort of place I imagined would harbor rats - and rummaged around. "Well, *gaa*lee! Lookie here what I done foun!" He produced a basketball with such an expression of delight and wonder you would have thought it made of gold, and began dribbling it.

"Lyn Charles," Ella Mae called down the hall, "how many times I gotta tell you 'bout playin with a ball in the house?"

L.C.'s younger brother, Terence, who was five at the time, came in from the hall, remarkably self-possessed, as

he would almost always be, leading his younger brother, Malcolm, who was two. Terence was tall and straight, pale like his mother - if you'll excuse a possibly offensive phrase, the color of coffee with plenty of cream - with her radiant amber eyes.

L.C. flipped him the ball, and I thought it was going to hit him in the chest, but, with surprising quickness, he caught it, letting go of Malcolm's hand.

Malcolm looked up in distress at his strange surroundings, his big dark eyes round with terror. He was wearing well-worn striped bib overalls and a white T-shirt, and, in that moment, he was the most perfect little creature - part pet, puppet, cartoon character, cherub, dark angel. His brothers were passing the ball back and forth with increasing force and speed, and his beautiful little face was contorting toward a wail.

Without thinking, I went to him and picked him up. He felt so firm and solid, satisfying to hold, with that sweet, indescribable, irresistible smell of babies and toddlers, that I found myself kissing his baby-soft cheek, and he wrapped his arms around my neck and gave me a slobbery kiss in return.

For a moment I froze, the summer heat intensified by his warm body and my sudden anxiety that his brothers might be jealous or offended by my taking such a liberty. But they kept flipping the ball with increasing velocity until Terence dropped it, and it bounced several times before L.C. could recover it.

"Don't make me come in there," Ella Mae warned.

L.C. hugged the basketball, bent over it as though it was a precious egg and one of us might try to wrest it from him. "Can I have it?! Please! Perty please, with sugar on it!"

I'd never heard that phrase before and found it too sugary to consider using it myself. Terence's eyelids were lowered a little, a slight smirk on his handsome face; he didn't beg, didn't respect anyone who did. A boy after my own heart, though I suspected even then that he was too proud and aloof to ever acknowledge much mutual respect for me.

"Why not?" I answered nonchalantly.

L.C. raised his chin and gave Terence a defiant grin.

Just then Ella Mae came into the room with a broom and dustpan, and L.C. darted into the closet quick as a rabbit.

"Malcolm don't go t' jus' innybody, Trevor," Ella Mae said, smiling benevolently, "He knows you got a good heart."

I promised myself I would try to deserve her and Malcolm's trust in me.

She looked up at the spider webs and sagging wallpaper a moment, deciding where to start. "You boys go on outside an' play. Aint no use 'n y'all breathin in all this dus'. Git outta that closet, Lyn Charles - an' stop rummagin roun like a rat in a sack o' peanuts."

L.C. crept out, trying unsuccessfully to hide the basketball behind his back, slinking toward the door, shifting it to his side, then in front. Ella Mae was sweeping at the cobwebs, not paying any attention to us, but that didn't diminish his delight in having sneaked it past her.

Mr. Alfred and Mr. Taylor were in the kitchen repairing a chair with the duct tape as we filed through, with me still proudly carrying Malcolm.

Safely out the back door, L.C. said, "Y'all got a hoop."

"Where?" I demanded.

"On back o' that there gararge."

There was a rusting regulation orange hoop attached at the correct height on the back of the garage. I sat Malcolm down in the shade of a nearby fig tree and he watched while his two brothers and I monkeyed around trying to get the ball through the hoop.

Even in the blistering heat, L.C. was impressively enthusiastic and soon showed considerable aptitude. Terence barely broke a sweat, but he too was surprisingly accurate. I could do little better than hit the garage with half my feeble attempts.

The Alexanders live about two-thirds of mile south beyond us along a dirt road, in an old house that belonged to Mr. Alfred. The boys were the only children near my age in the vicinity - except for Winston and Krystal, who wouldn't have been caught playing with me - so L.C. and I were drawn together by a dearth of alternatives.

Ella Mae worked as a maid for several families besides Mr. Edward's. She was always in demand and usually worked six days a week, and sometimes on Sunday afternoons, because she was skillful, hard-working, honest and unfailingly pleasant - but she was paid less than minimum wage, which was barely enough to feed and clothe the four of them.

Her husband Charles had been killed while she was still "carrying" (pregnant with) Malcolm. He had driven a Coke delivery truck and, while making a delivery in Pleasant Grove - which is no longer either pleasant or sylvan - he had tried to stop a robbery of a convenience store and was shot point-blank in the chest. He wasn't insured for such eventualities, and Ella Mae didn't receive a penny of compensation.

After Malcolm was old enough, all four of us played basketball almost year-round when the ground was dry

enough - usually L.C. and Malcolm against Terence and me.

Once in a while, when things weren't going L.C.'s way, he would grumble, "I'm gone take my ball an' go home!"

I would declare, "That isn't *your* ball."

"Is too! You give it to me! Didn' 'e, Terence?"

Terence, who usually played on my side, but rarely took it, nor any other, would shrug.

Once or twice I used the legalistic argument that "Why not?" didn't mean "Sure, you can have it." But my growing contempt for weasel words - especially after Bill Clinton's assertion about the meaning of "is" - I usually said something like, "Never was mine to give."

L.C. would hurl the ball down defiantly. "I aint *nevah* gone play with y'all no more!"

I would fold my arms, hold myself smugly erect, and say, "That doesn't bother me in the least." It didn't - for longer than five or ten minutes - because I knew L.C., unlike Terence and me, was incapable of holding a grudge.

After our first few spats, I knew the next time I saw L.C. he would be smiling, his eyes bright with his almost inexhaustible vitality.

We carried the mattress from Mr. Alfred's bed out onto what we called the cistern - though it was actually only the base that had once supported a large metal tank that stored rainwater collected by the gutter along the west side of the roof.

We slept with our clothes on, possibly because we could be seen from the road, or were simply too "tuckered out" to care.

The first night as I lay there gazing up at the night sky I became aware of mournful groans coming from the

Smitten is the best word I can come up with to describe the effect Sergeant Clarkson, the Marine recruiter, had on me. It was something like love at first sight, I suppose, and I pity the pathetic fool I will probably make of myself if I ever experience an effect so powerful with a woman.

I'd never seen such an admirable man: perfectly-proportioned physique, faultless posture, impeccable dress uniform with an impressive array of insignia and ribbons, handsome face, flashing black eyes, dignity, self-assurance . . . and he knew it.

He recognized a potential recruit, a young man looking for direction, self-assurance, escape, a sense of purpose . . . and he sauntered toward me with a look of recognition, a confident grin that would probably have offended me on someone with less charisma.

I'd still never had a hero and was probably well past ripe for one. Here was a man with strength, courage, prowess, accomplishment . . . and he found me worthy of his attention! He offered excitement, redemption and deliverance - though I couldn't have brought those words to mind at the time.

I could escape my dreary existence, prove my strength and stamina, find status and a sense of belonging. In retrospect, I think my body must have pumped out some endorphins with the thrill of challenge. I was elated, oblivious to the thought of future pain, ready for strenuous effort and self-sacrifice.

Obviously I wasn't thinking clearly, if at all.

By that time, any semi-aware high school student could see our invasion of Iraq had been a disaster, and, though I

was an inexperienced hick, I was certainly more intelligent and better informed than the average American male of my age.

Maybe, after so many years of careful self-control, the recklessness I'd seen in other adolescent boys was finally asserting itself. I felt I might face death and find the freedom, openness and joy in living I'd seen in Mr. Barnett. Probably, however, I was still in denial, not afraid of death because, despite all my recent thought about it, I still hadn't reached a visceral acceptance.

Maybe, by playing the gracious loser for Coach Howard, accepting I deserved and should have expected his rejection, I'd found some unconscious satisfaction in being a victim, connected with some deep-seated need for self-sacrifice.

I didn't feel any fear of death in Sergeant Clarkson's presence. If I thought about the war, I imagined myself a brave and trustworthy comrade, a true brother in arms, capable of selfless sacrifice and suffering for my fellow soldiers.

I shunted aside the deceit and jingoistic bullying that led up to our disastrous invasion, my dismay when during its first days our forces were met by a huge dust storm, then a downpour that stalled their advance, as though a portent of the quagmire that lay ahead. I didn't recall the incompetence, the shameful impotence with which our forces had stood by while Baghdad, one of the world's oldest and greatest cities was looted and my disgust for the jubilant rah-rah all around me, and my contempt for the hysterical holy-roller blather about the signs of the approaching Apocalypse.

At the time, I had wanted to ask why they hadn't read God's disapproval in the dust storm and deluge. What would it take? A plague of lice, locusts, frogs and boils?

But I love America deeply, am devoted to the principles of democracy, liberty, equality and reward for merit. I wasn't ready to fight for the corrupt regime in power and the military-industrial complex Eisenhower had so eloquently warned against, but I *would* fight to redeem the honor of the nation I revere.

For all my weaknesses, I had never been a quitter. (I was conveniently overlooking my failure of commitment to the one man to whom I owed most.) If I'd learned one thing from my run-in with Billy, it was, despite my instinctive restraint and habitual forbearance, I was not a coward. If L.C., Terence or Kit were to get into a fight, I wouldn't hesitate to come to their assistance.

I would show these local yahoos who had the balls to be among "the few, the proud, the Marines!" I genuinely admire and respect the men with the strength and courage to join that elite force - though I suspect many of them are, like me at that time, hankering to prove themselves, more than a little self-deluded, and possibly somewhat masochistic.

Iin addition to a romantic dream of self-actualization and glory, this magnetic sergeant was also offering me almost immediate economic independence and educational benefits.

Thinking about it now, I believe what I felt - and feel even as I write this – the need for visceral connection, is common among young men, probably part of the primal impulse toward bonding forged in our collective past.

I know too little about the evolution of the human psyche to offer much explanation, but it seems to me

possible such feelings arise from the need for group cohesion required for the survival of our species, successful hunting and the defense of our homes and families – a valuable impulse that is exploited in the warfare that is perennial and possibly innate in our species.

This mysterious but powerful force is, I believe, the probable cause - or at least an important component - of our avid interest in sports and our compulsion to participate, especially in our formative years. I think and feel it's the source of the thought-free exhilaration I've so often experienced playing basketball, the force that propels me, numbs me to pain, and often thrills me when I run.

I think the drugs people turn to for relief of pain, boredom and low self-esteem are probably just poor substitutes for those our bodies produce – obtained with less effort, if you have access and the economic means, but probably not as deeply satisfying.

I can see now that, at that time, this promise of escape and connection, the possibility of self-transcendence, was a kind of narcotic, numbing me to the realization I would be deserting Mr. Alfred. I recall thinking he might feel relieved of an obligation he'd taken upon himself without fully realizing the eventual trouble and expense.

I don't recall even seriously consider the possibility that he might think I was skipping out on my obligation. Any part I might be required to play in his eventual death was apparently so painful to consider that I was oblivious to it.

Looking back, I'm baffled and ashamed that I was unable to recognize the paradox of being able to consider myself capable of courage and tenacity in a struggle for the foolish, ignorant, dishonest president I despised, while ignoring my own refusal to acknowledge my obligation to

the man who had given me the life I was apparently willing to sacrifice.

Evidently, all I could think of was myself, escape, atonement for having caused Billy to enlist, the admiration and envy my schoolmates would feel when they saw me in a Marine uniform. And if I were killed, what possible difference could that make? A few people might miss me, regret not having appreciated my value. All would have forgotten me within a few years.

I didn't even prepare my usual careful approach with Mr. Alfred. After dropping L.C. and his brothers off at home after school, I entered the familiar warmth of the kitchen almost buoyantly, and the moment Mr. Alfred's eyes met mine, asked, "What would you think about me joining the Marines?"

I was surprised when his usual gentle smile turned sober and his voice was grave. "You're legally grown now, Doodlebug. Y'r own man."

My face was hot with the smart of being granted adulthood, yet reminded of my dependency by that demeaning nickname.

"B'sides, I never did have no legal hold over ye. 'Fraid t' try. 'Fraid they'd take ye away from me."

I knew that, but recognized I owed him respect and obedience. "I know, sir, but I'd like your blessing."

His eyes widened with astonishment. "I caint give ye *that*." He shook his head in disbelief. "Why, it'd break my heart if you got y'rself killed in that crazy, good-f'r-nothin war."

"I won't get killed," I argued, "I might not even get sent to Iraq. I could get assigned to an embassy somewhere. Somewhere safe. I'd get educational benefits."

"Why, it'd prob'ly might near kill me," he continued, then looked up at me again, hurt and insulted. "You think I aint got somethin put back f'r you t' go t' college?"

I swallowed to ease the tightness of my throat. "I don' know, sir."

"Why, you dad-blame well sure do. When 've I ever let you go without somethin you needed 'r deserved?"

"Never," I sobbed. Some grown man! Some tough Marine!

"Set 'own."

I sat down like the chastened child I felt.

"I caint send ye t' Harvard 'r one o' them Ivy League colleges, but I 'spec' we c'n manage a state school."

After a moment he continued, "War's mighty hard an' ugly, son. I wouldn' min' you goin if they was a good reason t' fight, like me an' Nolan had."

Mr. Barnett was still in a coma, on life support, now at the VA Hospital in Lancaster, on the other side of Dallas.

After a moment of distraction, probably recollection of the demanding experience they had shared, he took a different tack. "You don' need the Marines t' make a man outta ye. Like Nolan tol' ye, settin' where you are now - like I tol' that princ'pal o' yours - you've turned out t' be a right fine young man.

"How many young men your age got a head on their shoulders good as yours? Not t' mention y'r heart. An' you wadn' hidin behin' the door when they passed out the tallywhackers."

I couldn't help laughing and covering my eyes to hide my discomfort with his too-obvious flattery. I couldn't recall him even referring to my penis since the time he'd called it a goober, knew he was using slightly bawdy humor to further penetrate my defenses.

"B'sides, the Marines caint help ye out there, no how." He paused before another change of tactics. "You think I don' know you're ready f'r somethin more 'n this ol' house an' a wore-out ol' geezer like me."

With all he'd done for me and his assurance of more, self-disparagement was too much, and more tears streamed down my cheeks.

After a moment he cleared his throat and said, "I was young once too, ye know."

He began to tell me about his experiences when he was my age, for the first time in our years together reminiscing about the war.

For the next few weeks, as though the shock of my proposed enlistment had brought the memories back and he was using them to further insure I got such foolishness out of my head, during supper, he recalled his experiences.

His closest friends, Mr. Barnett and a boy named Edward Harris - after whom he'd named his son - were slightly older and had enlisted before him. His mother was a widow, so he'd been exempt from the draft, but he was out of school and haunted by what he felt was his duty and the shame of possibly seeming to hide behind his mother's skirt. She had cried, but allowed him to go.

The war was clearly already being won in Europe, and he knew his destination would almost certainly be the Pacific, where the Japanese fleet had been effectively defeated. He had no doubt that Admiral Chester Nimitz had pretty much clenched an American victory at the Battle of Midway, but the Japanese were mounting a ferocious defense.

He'd always wanted to see the ocean, and the news of the bloody battles for every Pacific island in our slog toward Japan had made him realize he was "basic'ly a

coward" - an admission I'm sure meant to spur me to further assessment of my own less than audacious character - so he joined the Navy.

After training near San Diego he found himself aboard an aircraft carrier. Its name didn't lodge in my memory, probably because I was too caught up in his description of how huge it was and how overwhelming he'd found the vast Pacific, how small and insignificant it made him feel.

His fleet had been involved in the invasion of Okinawa, next to the D-Day invasion of Normandy, the biggest military assault in history. There were ships all around as far as he could see. He worked on the flight deck, loading "munitions" on the aircraft - hot, hurried and dangerous work, but in the heat of battle they'd all been too busy to think about that much.

He said he'd been so astonished with the kamikaze suicide attacks they hadn't frightened him. He could only stand there and gawk, unable to believe it was actually happening, that anyone would do such a thing, that any country would send a man on such a mission.

One of his most vivid memories was of a boy from western Oklahoma, Sonny, who he'd welcomed because he was younger, greener and even more of a hick. The "kid" also worked on the flight deck, fueling aircraft. He had blond hair and "big Kewpie-doll blue eyes" - I had some difficulty looking that word up, and I doubt the description was meant to be entirely flattering - and would strut around shirtless, showing off his handsome physique.

Mr. Alfred had considered him conceited and did his best to dislike him, but the kid was so open and cheerful that no one could resist him for long. Everyone said he was "slaphappy", too dumb to know how cocky he looked or that anyone might take offense, and eventually the kid's

constant cheerful enthusiasm had worn down Mr. Alfred's resistance.

One afternoon, during a hectic operation, a damaged plane had landed, caught the restraining cable with only one landing gear and come "careenin" toward him "like a big toy, tearin' off one wing, then the other" and there was a "flash o' fire an' a terrible scream." He had grabbed a fire extinguisher and rushed to put it out, found Sonny "charred completely black, 'cept f'r them big blue eyes." He was gasping for breath, and Mr. Alfred had found himself aching to breathe for him.

For years he had awoke gasping for air, in a cold sweat, his heart racing. His beloved Emma had soothed him back to sleep.

His friend Edward had been killed, along with over a thousand other Marines, taking the little island of Peleliu, an irrelevant target chosen by Gen. Douglas MacArthur - another reason Mr. Alfred despised him so thoroughly. I've heard him quote Truman several times: "I didn't fire MacArthur because he was a dumb son-of-a-bitch - though he was. But if that was against the law, half to two-thirds of our generals would be in jail." (I think I quote Mr. Alfred correctly, though he himself might not have memorized Truman's exact words. I know I myself often find when I check something - which I can't here - I'm off a little.)

Fortunately, I never saw Sergeant Clarkson again, so I never had to face the humiliation of having to weasel out of any commitment I'd led him to believe I was interested in making.

Mr. Alfred had brought me back down to earth, and I found myself steadier – not much happier or more satisfied,

but not as miserable and self-pitying as I'd been. And soon, as though I was on an emotional roller-coaster ride - an experience I've never actually had but definitely plan to - I found myself on a precipitous upswing.

We had a conference game with Pecan Grove, one of our oldest and toughest rivals, on their court, which is always a disadvantage. We'd beaten them earlier, but they'd sized us up and figured the only way they were likely to win would be to stop L.C., or at least slow him down considerably.

Their captain and point guard was a hot-shot Adonis with clear blue eyes, a smile worth several thousand dollars of his daddy's money, and slightly-suspicious pale blond hair with a perfect cut - down in his face with the slightest tussle, then, with one sweep of his hand, almost perfect again.

He was needling L.C., and he and the other guard or one of their forwards were double-teaming him.

By halfway through the first period they had L.C. seriously rattled. We had a lead, but it was slim and closing.

Coach Howard sent me in with a familiar assignment: Calm L.C. down. When I got in, I kneaded his trapezius, which had grown impressively thick and solid, and said, "If you don't settle down, I'm gonna kick your ass." (In case you haven't noticed, that's pretty strong language for me.)

He gave me an exaggerated look of alarm. "Whoa! I better settle myself on down!"

But they already had him shook, were rattling his cage by taunting, "Oh, Elsie," in falsetto voices under their breath. (How was I to have known that the nickname I'd stuck him with could so easily be turned into a taunt?)

It wasn't long until L.C., apparently taking his cue from Elsie, the dairy cow, grabbed his pud and muttered something like, "Try a little o' this milk."

One long loud whistle, "Technical!", and L.C. was on the bench, crestfallen and fuming.

Coach Howard left me in and sent Troy, the forward I'd gone in for, our next-best ball-handler, after Kit, in as guard. By the buzzer, we were down seven.

But a few minutes into the second half the years of experience Terence and I had of being dirt-court teammates began to pay off, and Kit was, as always, solid and steady.

I'm sure it turned into an exciting game for the spectators, but I found myself calm, determined and focused - my only distraction, Alison Valdez.

She was a sophomore, familiar to me for years because of her beautiful face, lovely smile, big luminous brown eyes, long silky black hair . . . and she'd recently filled out big time and now has a body that, as L.C. had noted admiringly, "won't quit". As a cheerleader, she has some license to be a little sassier and flouncier than the average girl, and she takes full advantage.

But back to the game, where I was managing to keep my mind most of the time. Terence and I were clicking, and he was sinking jump shots smooth as whipped cream. We were neck and neck in the final stretch, with seconds left on the clock, and one point behind when I came down with a rebound and was fouled.

One-and-one. Neither Terence not Kit looked at me, but they were both smiling confidently. I doubt if even Alison Valdez could have shaken me on my first shot. No stall or dribble for me: up and in, with a satisfying swoosh of the net.

There was considerable jubilation among our fans, an almost total silence, then jeers and chatter - none of it getting to me much. I seem to have been almost outside myself. I thought of that thrilling moment with Krystal, cautioned myself not to think. One easy inhalation, exhale, release. The ball clipped the front of the rim, bounced up and off its back, circled and fell through.

We put on a full-court press, and the final buzzer was barely audible above the roar, my senses diminished by stunned disbelief. Terence, with twenty-two points, had been the hero, but I was mobbed. I doubt if I could ever get used to so much attention, however positive, and I was swamped, felt almost as though I was under assault.

There was a lull, when no one was hugging, shaking, slapping, shouting at me, and I was making my way through the throng when Alison, her beautiful eyes shining, threw her arms around my neck, pressed her breasts against me and tried to pull me down to kiss me. I was literally scared stiff, body and member, with my jock helping hold down the latter, and, before I could think, she was scowling, pushing me away, saying, "No wonder people call you Mr. Goody Two-Shoes!"

I don't blame her; she has a right to expect a more positive reaction to her abundant charm and generous attention. But couldn't she have given me a moment to collect myself?! Or another chance later?

I had my reservations: She's a little too young and, to be perfectly honest, probably a little too hot for me to handle - but with a slower approach I might have gotten past my self-doubt and inhibitions.

One strike and I was out. For the rest of the year, the minute my eyes met hers, they were off, in much the same

way Kit had avoided my eyes in junior high and I'd avoided his after my fight with Billy. She never relented.

By that point I was again recognizing the tenacity of my own stubborn pride, so I couldn't blame her for having hers. I hope she'll forgive me and give me another chance. Fat chance, you're probably thinking.

After our bus ride back to Nicklesburg, Terence, L.C. and I were silent during our drive home in my truck. I was still stung by Alison's derision, wondering if I deserved her put-down, brooding because I felt she'd deprived me of one of the most joyous moments of my life.

I couldn't help it if circumstances had made me cautious, if being conscientiously virtuous was the best way I'd found to avoid the rejection that had been too often forthcoming. Hadn't she herself been too quick to judge?

Terence always sat beside me, erect and holding himself apart from me, as though I was responsible for his being stuck with the seat of dishonor in the middle, not necessary on that ride because L.C. didn't have Malcolm on his lap. I knew why L.C., in his usual place next to the passenger door, was quiet.

When we reached their house and L.C. opened the door to let Terence out, he growled, "Hurt y'r mouth t' thank Dude?"

"I don' have t' thank Dude," Terence muttered, "He knows anything I got 's his f'r the askin."

I crumpled against the door in deliberately exaggerated astonishment, trying to lighten up the mood because I saw L.C. had more to get off his chest.

He grumbled, "Michael Jackson was grabbin his Johnson on network TV b'fore I was even born."

It wasn't the first time I'd heard my last name used as one of the many alternatives for penis. Poor Michael,

grotesque from too much cosmetic surgery, the butt of cruel jokes because of his obsession with boys. Has there ever been better evidence that fame and fortune can't insure happiness? "That mean I gotta start worryin about you grabbin mine?"

"Don't get y'r hopes up," he growled, but I knew I'd found an opening.

"That ref's a bigot."

I'd known that was coming long enough to have a response prepared. "If he's the last bigot you ever run into, you can consider yourself *damn* lucky."

He gave me a smoldering glare, muttered, "I'm gone git me a notebook an' start writin down all this deep shit you always shovelin at me."

"Sounds like a good idea t' me," I replied.

"Dude!" was all he could get out before he gave into helpless laughter, always irresistible, especially when I'm the one who provokes it. His emotions are always mercurial, so I wasn't surprised when tears came as he gave up the frustration he'd kept bottled up too long.

He was chuckling again as he opened the door and got out, pausing to ask, "What I'm gone do 'thout you nex' year?"

"I guess you'll have t' start ridin the bus again."

"I'm gone *bus* you one," he threatened playfully as he slammed the door, still chuckling and shaking his head as he walked away.

I felt especially contented with myself as I drove home, undressed and fell into my welcoming bed, still amazed by Alison's attraction to me and sudden scorn, but, proud and pleased with my overall performance that night, and I drifted off to sleep imagining I could set things right with her.

DOODLEBUG *is the nickname Alfred, an elderly rancher, gives Trevor when he rescues him from a squalid travel trailer where he'd been abandoned to the care of his drug-addled grandmother and her abusive, alcoholic partner. Now 19, Dude is in a correctional facility charged with assisting the suicide of his guardian. He recalls his unconventional upbringing on a ranch near Nicklesburg, a small town northeast of Dallas, his struggle for acceptance, and his friends.*

DOODLEBUG