

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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This thesis, *Clay Street*, is a collection of three short stories with an introduction. The introduction explains what I believe good fiction writing must include, the influences on my writing, and what I try to accomplish in my writing. The stories are independent even though the protagonists live on the same street.

The first work, "Paula Bargar," is about a single waitress and mother of one daughter. Paula is lonely and demands the attentions of her married lover Teddy. Paula is unstable and finds herself engaging in abnormal behavior such as scratching a car's paint.

"Jimmy Ray" is about a young man who becomes infatuated with Jan, the girlfriend of Martin, a friend of Jimmy's. Jimmy realizes that Martin does not respect him and treats him badly. Jimmy gets into a fight with Martin over the treatment of Jan. Jimmy experiences the loss of respect and friendship from Jan.

"Wally Stogsdill" is about a frustrated dentist who is losing badly needed patients to a new dentist in the town. Wally's inability to face and cope with reality lead him to bizarre actions.

CLAY STREET

A Thesis

Presented to

The Division of English

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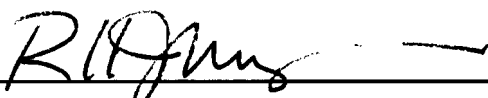
Master of Arts

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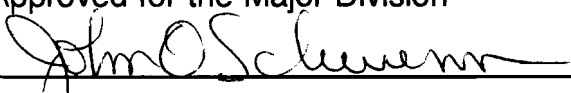
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PREFACE

This is a collection of short stories about people who live on Clay Street in a small unnamed town. Each work is independent of the others in spite of the connection to the neighborhood.

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Introduction

People read literature for many reasons. Some like the entertainment it provides. The drama, humor, and action can move a reader to tears, laughter, or a higher pulse rate. Entertainment is a legitimate benefit of literature and should not be ignored when considering its value. Fiction sometimes goes beyond amusement, however, and creates a climate in which a reader can grow or learn. Art in general and literature in particular can inform those who are interested in a culture--even their own. A book or short story acts as a mirror that enables the reader to see him or herself, his or her contemporaries, or even his or her world in a new light. I would say that artists are a culture's secular prophets.

When I read interesting books or short fiction, I find certain things always stand out. The characters prove interesting and I either care about them or I fear them. Perhaps the fear comes from the realization that the abnormal character is not always so different from the normal. A strong conflict maintains a consistent pace that does not allow the reader to get bored. This tension can come in the form of action against some great obstacle such as a flood or sickness, or it can come in the form of an internal struggle that the protagonist does not even understand.

These elements are found in the works of the writers that have influenced my writing. Eudora Welty's personal testimony essays strike me, every time I read them, with their powerful description of physical surroundings. The reader can easily picture vivid scenes in old houses and neighborhood grocery stores. Welty's sense of rhythm has also had a profound effect on me. As I read along, I feel as if I'm sitting next to an old southern grandmother who has put her arm around me as I listen to her soft voice rise, fall, and pause as she tells her story. James Baldwin also used rhythm successfully; I have sometimes found myself trying to copy his

hypnotic incantation to pull a reader into a story. Flannery O'Connor's work is filled with rich detail showing the surroundings that inform the reader of the inner workings of her characters, as well as the physical setting. Finally, Sherwood Anderson's ability to create grotesques that look like normal people has prodded me to try do likewise in more than one story.

Even though these writers have influenced my work and I have tried to imitate them, I find that I do not write like them. My style is still evolving, but it has definitely taken its own path. My characters are not Welty's rural, small town, Mississippi people, Baldwin's black inner city men looking for their identity, or anything of the sort. They are not heroic or especially evil, and their situations are not unusual in the least. Instead of writing about idyllic or outright terrible people, I use everyday folks in ordinary circumstances. Hopefully, that helps the reader care about them.

Normal people in a difficult situation can inspire warm feelings but they can also inspire fear. When we see someone who is like us, and they are suffering, we naturally sympathize with them and want them to triumph. On the other hand, when we see normal people and/or characters do abnormal things we think, in the back of our minds, they could be my neighbors or worse--me. Either way, in fiction the reader must care about the character and what happens to him or her for the piece to work.

Most of my characters come from the dark corners of my memory. While there are exceptions, my protagonists usually have their genesis in someone I knew in my childhood. The only link between the story and the person I once knew may be nothing more than an attitude or some strange action or quirk, but the connection makes it possible for me to begin creating a character that I hope is believable. In using people from my past in my writing, I write about my culture or at least a part of it. I do not set out to teach people about life in small town Kansas in the middle to late twentieth

century, but it is a natural result.

While the people I knew in my childhood did not always come to an epiphany, most of my characters do. I believe it is necessary for the reader to have some kind of closure, and an epiphany makes that possible. Sometimes however, that new understanding is not the character's but reader's. Either kind of epiphany may lead to restoration or despair; both will work, and both will even bring something home to the reader. What that something is will depend on how the reader views the work. I have found myself writing more stories with an ending full of despair, but I have begun to use endings in which the protagonist makes some positive change that will make for a brighter future.

Such "enlightenment" would not be necessary if my characters did not have some flaw in their nature. Though the protagonists appear to be normal people living their lives in a normal way, their abnormalities are eventually seen to be compulsive. I see these characters as grotesques in a mental or emotional way. The trick is to show the flaws to the reader while balancing the distance.

I have struggled to find a medium between sentimentality and being so distant that the protagonists go flat. The use of third person, limited omniscient make it possible to find that balanced distance and provide the necessary immediacy. I believe that using such a point of view gives the reader three advantages. First, it makes it possible to know character, to know his or her thoughts, and finally, to know more than the character because the reader has a distance from the conflict that gives a perspective that the character does not. The reader can then watch the gap between the internal and external position of the protagonist close, eventually bringing the epiphany.

Immediacy also depends on the description the writer uses. Lines

showing a pool ball rolling slowly across the green felt on the table making swirls in the cigarette smoke puts the reader in the room watching the events with the characters. Realistic dialogue almost brings the reader into the conversation or argument. That does not mean an over abundance of dialogue proves necessary. Sometimes a few lines with restrained anger or confusion will say more than a page of printed words. Another way I try to create immediacy is by using vivid action so the reader actually senses the movement and speed in which it happens. A man throwing his dinner across the room is useless unless the reader can see it oozing down the wall.

My thesis consists of three short stories about three people who live quiet lives filled with longing. Their desires are so strong and unfulfilled that they are driven to desperate acts. The flaws in these people make them grotesques in an emotional sense. Most interesting to me is that they really aren't so different from the rest of us. They have the same drives and needs we do, but they try to fulfill them in what, I hope, is a different way.

PAULA BARGAR

A young family came into the restaurant, and Paula watched as they waited for the hostess to seat them. The five of them streamed in--the parents, two girls and a boy. None of the children looked over nine.

"Hi," Paula said, when she went to take their order. "Do you know what you want, or do you need a little more time?" She looked at the husband.

"Just a little more time, thanks," said the wife.

"Okay, I'll be back in a bit," Paula said, taking her cue from the woman, and deciding she didn't like her. Too much blond hair, she thought. She proceeded to look out the large plate glass windows, trying to guess which car belonged to the family. As soon as the parents had folded all of the menus and put them on the table, Paula scurried back to their table.

"Okay, folks. What'll it be?"

The woman ordered for the children and then for herself. The husband ordered last. Paula looked at their clothes as she took their order. The boy, who was the youngest, wore a red Kansas City Chiefs sweatshirt with a white turtleneck shirt under it. In tiny stitching, the turtleneck had "Chiefs" embroidered on it. One of the girls wore a turtleneck shirt with a pullover jacket. The other girl and the father wore a sweater with a shirt collar showing at the neck. The mother had on a solid light blue shirt with a brown leather Air Force jacket. They all wore blue jeans.

Paula gave the order to the cook and then looked out the window again, searching for the car. She picked the white Saab. They look like the white wine and Saab set, she thought. When she delivered food to other customers in the same section, Paula glanced at the family as they ate. She noticed that both parents stopped to listen to the children when they spoke. The family didn't laugh more than the other customers, and they didn't

quarrel either. Nothing distinguished them from countless others who had eaten in Baylock's over the years, but Paula resented them. Too prissy, she thought.

When they had nearly finished their meal, Paula stopped to ask if they wanted desert or more pop and iced tea. The mother said no, and Paula put their check on the table. She smiled at the husband as she told them to come back. Paula watched the family pay for their meal and waited to see if they would get into the Saab. Instead, they walked toward a room on the first floor of the motel.

At four o'clock, Paula put her time card into the clock and punched out. She said good-by to one of the other waitresses and went out to wait for her ride, not noticing that it was cool outside. It wasn't until five or ten minutes went by that she felt the chill and began walking up and down the sidewalk to warm herself. She looked at the close gray sky and at the parking lot for the first sign of her ride. As she turned toward the motel, she saw the white Saab.

Paula walked in the direction of the car with a leisurely gait. When she came within a few feet she tried to see inside, looking for some clue about the owners. When she reached the car she turned and walked the other way. When she had walked to the end of the lot, she turned to the white Saab again.

"Wonder what that thing cost?" she asked herself. "More than I can spend, I'll bet."

Paula had decided, at the far end of the lot, what she would do when she reached the car again. As she approached the car she looked around to see if anyone was watching then walked to the front passenger window. She saw a map, spiral notebook, some CD's and a hairbrush scattered around the

interior. She walked around the car, saw a coloring book, a Barbie doll, children's books, and a few French fries on the floor. The driver's side only had a travel coffee cup, the bottom ridiculously wider than its top, sitting on the dash.

Paula walked up on the sidewalk and headed toward the far end of the lot again. She looked toward the entrance of the lot, wondering aloud where her ride was. She stopped where the lot ended and the next building began. She scanned room windows on her side of the motel and began counting them. Paula had worked in Baylock's for years but had never wondered how many rooms the motel had. She counted sixty and guessed that the other side had an equal number.

"One hundred and twenty," she said aloud.

The sound of her voice surprised her. She gazed at rooms with drapes drawn open, looking for no one in particular. Because it was cloudy, there was no glare on the glass to obstruct her view, and some of the rooms had lights on, so she could see inside. She stopped when she saw movement in one of the rooms on the second floor. It was a middle-aged man looking through a suit case or a brief case; Paula couldn't be sure. Probably a business man or a salesman. She didn't see the Saab family.

Paula began wandering again, toward the car, her attention still on the room windows. After abandoning the salesman, she took in other windows that offered a hint of occupancy. She became uncomfortable with what she was doing, but didn't turn away. She saw people through other windows, a couple trying to quiet a baby and an elderly woman watching TV, but they did not interest her. She kept looking for more undrawn drapes, anyway; something to do, she told herself.

Finally, she turned her attention back to the lot. Beginning at the far end she examined each automobile: Toyotas, Nissans, Fords, Dodges, a

Mercedes Benz, and the Saab. Approaching it, she looked at the rooms again, the restaurant window, and the parking lot. When she reached the car she opened her purse and removed her keys. Paula put her house key against the passenger side and walked all the way around the car, dragging her key across the white paint. As she walked around the Saab, vandalizing it, Paula saw again the spiral notebook, dolls, and coffee cup. She didn't bring the key away from the car until she had gone down the passenger side, across the trunk, and up the driver side. She didn't scratch the hood.

Back on the sidewalk, Paula walked away, returning her keys to her purse. She looked straight ahead as she strolled. When she was half-way down the lot, her ride drove up. He smiled as Paula got into his car and then turned around and headed away from the Saab. Paula took a deep breath, the tension draining.

"Good tips, today," Teddy asked.

"Okay," Paula said. "Are you taking the rest of the day off?"

"Naw. Just long enough to drive you home. I gotta get back to the store," he said.

"How come?" There was edge in her voice. The tension was building again.

"How come? Why do you think? I can't take every day off to spend with you. I have work to do."

"You got people to work for you," Paula said looking out the window. She thought about one of their trips to Wichita where they spent a whole weekend together away from his car dealership and his family.

"Damn it, Paula. They can't make the decisions. They can't run it. I run it."

"Never changes." The edge in her voice was sharper now. "Will I see you tonight for dinner?"

“Probably not. I should spend some time with my kids.”

“Come on over. You’re always spending time with your kids.”

Neither spoke until Teddy bounced over the pot holes into her driveway.

“Well, here you are,” Teddy said. “Safe and sound, as always. Will I see you for lunch tomorrow? I’m free then.” He didn’t look at Paula but adjusted his rearview mirror.

“I’m working lunch tomorrow,” Paula said. She watched her hands turn into fists.

“Oh. How about after you’re off?” Teddy asked.

“I suppose.” Paula hated the sound of her voice. It reminded her of her mother when the woman gave in to her father.

“Okay, I’ll pick you up. Will your daughter be home,” Teddy asked.

“Debate team meets after school every day. Tracy won’t be home until five or so,” said Paula.

“Good. We’ll come here then. Okay?”

“Yeah.” Paula’s reply was not enthusiastic.

Teddy leaned over to her and they kissed for a few seconds. Quietly, Paula opened the door and stepped out into a hole in what was supposed to be her driveway. Water filled her shoe as Teddy put the car in reverse and she closed the door.

Paula waited for the car to clear the driveway and then walked to the steps that were her front porch and sat down. She didn’t care that the cement was wet, cold, and uncomfortable. She removed her wet shoe, slowly and then the other one, as well. The air felt good. She wrapped her frayed nylon jacket around herself and stared at her feet, examining them with care--the toes, the nails. They were not the feet of an old woman, but they felt like it. Need to polish my nails, she thought. Either that or clean them.

Elm leaves blew across the yard. Paula felt the chill again but didn't move. She watched the leaves float by and listened to their sound as they rustled past. She saw the Boxburger twins walking home from kindergarten. Could they be old enough for school already?

Beyond the little boys was the Klein house. It had a better yard than most of the houses on Clay street. Paula had tried to rent that house when she first moved to the neighborhood but she was afraid of the higher rent. A few unexpected bills in a single month could put her and Tracy in a real bind. Paula admired the driveway. Mr. Klein, a retired railroader, had put it in the previous summer. The house was white with dark brown shutters, and the color reminded Paula of the white Saab.

"God, what's wrong with me?" she asked herself.

Paula watched her daughter, Tracy, walking down the middle of the street. The fifteen year-old girl wore a cream colored sweater with a crew neck. She wore a white shirt with blue stripes under the sweater, and she left the collar laying out, over the neck of the sweater. Her white canvas tennis shoes contrasted with her stone washed Levis. A dark red book pack hung carelessly over her left shoulder. Paula watched her as she made her way home.

"Hi mom. Been here long?" Tracy asked, walking up to the house.

"Long enough to see you hunched over yourself as you trudge home."

"Nobody else talks about my posture." The girl was alert now.

"Nobody else cares about you." Silence. "Come on. Let's go in. There's dinner to fix."

Tracy obediently opened the door and walked in. Paula followed, closing it.

Tracy dropped her book pack on the couch as her mother headed for her bedroom to change clothes. Tracy could hear her moving hangers on the

rack, unzipping, and zipping again. Just before Paula opened her door, Tracy walked into the kitchen and started looking through the refrigerator.

"What do you want to eat?" Tracy asked.

"We'll make a casserole tonight," replied Paula. "How does tuna sound?"

Tracy didn't answer. She went to one of the cupboards and began rummaging through the canned goods.

"Teddy might come by tonight so we better make enough for three," Paula said.

"Figures," Tracy said putting the cans of tuna on the counter.

"Why can't you give that man a break?" Paula asked. "He hasn't done anything to hurt you." She stood like a statue waiting for her daughter to face her.

"Mom," Tracy moaned. "He doesn't belong here." Tracy turned away from her mother as she spoke.

Paula slammed the lid to the electric skillet on the counter. Her daughter cringed at the sound though she tried to hide it. As Paula looked through a drawer for the electric cord for the skillet, Tracy put five cans of tuna next to the can opener.

"We don't need five cans of tuna-fish for one meal." Paula's voice was rising.

"Teddy eats a lot," Tracy said. Then under her breath, "He needs it after all the energy he spends here."

They didn't begin eating until it had cooled enough so that Tracy had to put it in the microwave to warm it up again. When they did start, the meal passed in silence except for a few comments about whether or not the casserole had enough of the right seasonings. Paula kept rising to get some

milk, or pepper, whatever would give her an excuse to move. Tracy ate without concern for her mother's fidgetiness. Eventually, after Tracy had finished eating and cleared the table away, she turned to her mother and told her that she needed to go the library for two or three hours.

"When do you think you'll be in?" Paula asked.

"Mom, I just told you I'll only be gone for a while." Tracy sighed and rolled her eyes. "I'll be back by eight."

"I want you to go there and come right back. Do you hear?" Paula's words were sharp. She remembered her own trips to the library when she was in school. It was on one of those trips that she became pregnant with Tracy.

"Uh huh," Tracy mumbled as she rummaged through her book pack. "Do you have any money for the copier? I only have seventy-five cents."

"Take a couple of dollars from my dresser. But don't take my Susan B. Anthony. It'll be worth money some day."

"It's worth a dollar right now, Mom. And it's not going to be worth any more than that."

Paula paced in the living room, a room so small, she could take only three steps in any direction before turning the other way. She punctuated her walk with a glance out the window. The sidewalk and street glistened with the light drizzle that was coming down.

Tracy came into the room wearing a navy blue toggle coat with her book pack over her shoulder.

"What's it doing outside?" Tracy asked.

"You'll need an umbrella. It's wet." Paula continued to stare out at the street. She held her face close to the glass to shade the glaze. "I want you to do something for me."

"Milk or something?" Tracy asked.

"I want you to make a phone call, to Teddy and see if he's all right."

Tracy stood, looking at her mother, her mouth open slightly. When Paula didn't hear a reply, she looked back into the room.

"Well," she said.

"Mom, why do you want me to do that?"

"I just told you. To see if he's all right." Paula's voice was at a slightly higher pitch. "Oh go on, it won't hurt you."

"Why don't you," Tracy demanded. He's your boyfriend, not mine." She stood still, feeling her stomach turn.

"Just make the damn call. Or maybe you don't want to go to the library after all."

"I have to go to the library. I have a book--"

"Then you'd better start doing what I say." Paula's voice was seething now and her lips were razor thin. "I'm getting sick and tired of you not doing what you're told. Besides it won't hurt you any. I just want to know if he's okay."

"But I don't want to. He's not my boyfriend. I don't even like him."

"Listen, young lady. You don't have to like him. I do and he likes me and that's the end of it."

Paula was close to her daughter now. Tracy could smell her mother's breath. Neither spoke for a moment. They just stood, sizing each other up.

Quietly, Tracy took a step back and let her pack slide from her shoulder. Paula watched as her daughter opened a little card file next to the phone to get Teddy's number. Tracy held the card by its edges as if she didn't want to touch it, and then she carefully put it on the table next to the telephone which had a clear plastic cover so that the inner workings were visible. A band of blue neon light that went all the way around the top colored Tracy's face as she bent over it to push the buttons. It rang four or five times before someone

answered.

“Hello, is Mr. Nollar in please?” Now it was Tracy’s voice that was strained. After a brief pause, Tracy turned to her mother and silently mouthed the words “It’s his wife. She wants to know who I am.”

“Tell her you work for Teddy.” Paula was steady and calm now, determined.

“Um, I’m one of Mr. Nollar’s employees.” Her voice rose at the end of the sentence as if she were asking a question. “I need to ask him about what I’m supposed to have done for tomorrow.”

Tracy listened for a moment and then turned to her mother, without looking at her, whispering, “She’s calling him.”

Paula took the receiver from her daughter, and Tracy stepped back away from the phone and her mother. Tracy looked, for a moment, as if she didn’t know what to do next. As Paula listened and waited for Teddy, Tracy picked up her book pack, opened the front door, and walked out into the dark rain.

Paula didn’t hear her daughter leave but continued waiting for Teddy to pick up the phone so she could punish him for not coming to dinner. She wanted him to know that she was mad. When he finally came to the phone, he was angry too. He didn’t ask who was calling.

“Paula, what are you doing calling me here?” His voice was not loud but it was sharp.

“I thought you were coming for dinner. You stood us up.” Paula was angry now, too. “We waited and waited and finally ate. Tracy had to warm it up in the microwave before we could start. Where were you?”

“I told you I wouldn’t be over tonight. I’ll see you tomorrow.” Teddy voice was growing tighter.

“Well why didn’t you come over? You could have and you know it.

You could have made an excuse. You've done it before."

"I told you, I'll see you tomorrow. Now that's enough." His voice was almost squeaking.

"You'll be over here tonight, mister." Paula sounded like a piece of sharp ice.

Teddy was quiet for a moment and then said, "Okay, I'll make some excuse and come. Give me thirty minutes, okay?"

"I'll be here," Paula said and hung up.

During the half hour that Teddy took to escape his family and make the drive, Paula took a quick bath, applied mascara, and blush. She wore her favorite blue-jeans and white turtle-neck shirt with a dark blue sweat-shirt over it. The sweat-shirt had a Halloween pumpkin on the front. She could hear Teddy's car door slam as she finished putting her K-Mart athletic shoes on. She ran to the door and opened it as Teddy began knocking.

"Hi. Come in."

Teddy didn't come in. Instead he began a tirade. "Damn it. What are you trying to do to me? You could have ended my marriage tonight. Damn it. What's wrong with you? I could lose everything."

He looked older than his fifty years. He was wearing the same pants, shirt, and jacket he had worn earlier when he had driven Paula home. The muted light made the wrinkles in his face appear deeper. His cheeks seemed to be hollow.

"Oh shut up, you big cry baby. You're out of the house and you're with me, aren't you? What are you complaining about," Paula asked matter of factly.

"What on earth possessed you to tell my wife that you worked for me," Teddy demanded.

"Tracy did that. I didn't. I just took the phone after she called for you."

"Tracy? Damn." Paula could hear him take a deep breath.

Neither spoke for a moment. Paula stepped back to allow Teddy inside but he didn't move. Paula's looked at him in surprise.

"Well," she asked. "Are you coming or going?"

"I'm going. I have to get right back."

Paula's eyes narrowed and her lips grew thin. "You son-of--"

"All right. I'll talk for a while. But just for a while," Teddy said.

"Let's don't stay here," Paula said. "Let's go for a drink or something. Even a cup of coffee. We could just go for a short drive." Paula had taken some of the edge out of her voice. She seemed more relaxed. "It'll be okay. It'll be good for us to talk a little."

Teddy looked at the floor as if he didn't know what to do. He looked around the neighborhood and then back at Paula.

"Okay. A drive."

Paula picked up her coat and purse and closed the door. She ignored the burning lights in the house and walked behind Teddy to his car. Neither spoke as Teddy started the car and backed out of the drive way. He turned on the lights and windshield wipers and drove east.

Eventually, Teddy began to relax. "Well, what do you want to talk about?"

"Is that all you can say? You're Mister Romantic aren't you?"

"Paula, we can't keep doing this. It's destroying my marriage and it's affecting my work." Teddy stared at the road in front of them.

"Your marriage? What about us?" Paula didn't sound angry, just tired.

Teddy looked at the green shadows of her face that the dash lights created, but she looked straight ahead at the street, main street turning into

Highway 4. Teddy picked up speed as they passed the Dairy Queen. He asked Paula if she wanted an ice cream cone or Coke. She didn't reply.

"We have to break this off, Paula. This is killing us both. Now your daughter is involved."

"She just called you up. She's not involved," Paula said.

"Of course she's in it. This has to stop. Tonight, Paula." Teddy tightened his grip on the steering wheel as if that added emphasis.

"Fine." Paula was still looking straight ahead. "We'll end it tonight."

When Teddy began slowing down she asked, "Are you turning around?"

"Yeah, I have to get home, remember?"

"We can't even finish our drive? What kind of scum are you?"

"Our drive is ended." Teddy's anger was rising again. "We're going home."

"You damned right we are," Paula shouted. "We are done. Let's just go home right now." She slammed her fist sideways into the door making a loud thump.

Teddy pulled the car over and after looking in his mirror turned around on the highway. Paula continued to stare at the dark gray pavement as the headlights illuminated it. She finally looked over at Teddy and remarked that he was handsome and that she hoped they could still be friends. He didn't answer. When Paula reached over and touched his arm, Teddy did not respond. Paula withdrew her hand and stared at him.

When the car crested a hill she could see the city lights. In a few minutes, Paula knew, he would take his foot off the accelerator and coast into town. They had taken this drive many times before.

As they neared the bottom of the hill, Paula stopped staring at Teddy and opened the door. Teddy looked over to see what was happening but he

only saw Paula jumping from the car. Before his foot could move the few inches to the brake, Paula hit the ground and began rolling on the shoulder of the highway.

Teddy could not yell or say anything as he slammed the car to a stop. He could only make a long, single scream. He did not drive the car off the highway. He stopped in the middle of the west bound lane and jumped out of the car. He could not see Paula in the dark. After a moment of indecision he got back into his car and turned it around so he could use the headlights to find her.

She was lying face down, half on the shoulder and half in the ditch. The upper part of her body was obscured by the high grass. As Teddy ran to her, he could only manage a mumbled mixture of Paula's name and weeping. When he knelt beside her he stopped and carefully reached out to touch her arm.

When he touched her, Paula made a muffled groan. Teddy told her not to move and that he would go for help but she was becoming aware of her surroundings and pushed him away. Teddy watched her roll herself over and look up into the sky.

"I don't feel anything." She spoke in the voice of a little girl who was just waking up. "There's no pain."

Teddy repeated his intention to get help but she refused it. At her request, he helped her sit up, and in a few minutes he helped her into the car.

The drive back into town was slow--never going over twenty-five miles-per-hour. Each time Teddy talked about finding a doctor or going to the hospital, Paula simply refused. "I'll be okay," is all she would say.

When they got back to her house on Clay street, she let Teddy help her inside. He went to the refrigerator looking for beer, but there wasn't any. He finally found some bourbon in the kitchen closet and poured two drinks. He

set her drink on the coffee table and then sat beside her. They stared at the window, or wall, or the television that wasn't on and drank. Neither spoke or moved except to pour more bourbon.

"Tracy will be home from the library in a little while," Paula said. "I want to be in bed before she gets here."

"Okay, I'll go home," he said though not moving.

"What will you tell your wife?"

"That I had to fix something at work," he said simply. "Do you still want to meet at lunch time?"

"Yeah, that'll be fine."

Paula watched as Teddy got up and walked to the door. She noticed the deep shadows on his face were still there. She asked him not to lock the door so her daughter could get in the house. After the door was closed, Paula sat for another fifteen or twenty minutes and then walked into the bedroom. She undressed and soaked in the tub for a while. Then she turned off all the lights except one in the living room and sat down to wait for Tracy. She thought about having another drink but didn't have the strength to make the effort.

Paula wondered what book Tracy needed at the library and planned to ask. Paula began thinking about her having made Tracy call Teddy. She felt some pangs of remorse and wanted to make it up to her. As she thought about what she would say to her daughter, Paula decided to have another drink after all and leaned back on the sofa trying to get comfortable. She was feeling the bruises she sustained on the highway. Her mind drifted away from her daughter to the Saab. Paula didn't feel remorse about that though. She didn't feel anything at all. Eventually, she drifted off into a light sleep. At nine-thirty she woke up and went to her bedroom and closed the door.

JIMMY RAY

Until Jimmy left high school, he had not given a single thought to what he would do when he graduated. When May fifteenth came, he simply walked through the graduation ceremony, posed for pictures with his parents, and went home. At a party that evening, someone surprised him by asking what he was going to do now that he was out of school. He was dumbfounded when his father asked him the same question the next morning. Since he couldn't think of anything else to do, he applied for a job with the Union Pacific railroad. Thus Jimmy decided that he was on his way to manhood. This thought pleased him since his father did the same when he left school a generation before.

At the end of the summer, Jimmy moved out of his parents house and rented a small two bedroom place on Clay Street. It wasn't spectacular, even by Jimmy's standards. Small with faded paint and old curtains, he still enjoyed living there on his own. It reminded him of the house his family had lived in when he was very young.

This is what a man does, he thought. And Jimmy wanted to be a man. He wanted to be like his father, like most boys, but he wanted to be respected by his friends too. When he moved into his new house, he planned a party and invited his entire graduating class. He didn't ask any of his younger friends who were still in school because he didn't want to be associated with kids, anyone young enough to still be in high school.

Out of one hundred four people in his class, about twenty showed up, some with friends or dates that Jimmy hadn't seen before. Jimmy was disappointed in the turnout until someone pointed out that a large number of their class had left the area to go to college or vo-tech. This made him feel better and enabled him to enjoy his own party.

He provided plenty of beer, and dope, and music. Heavy metal was his

favorite so that's what he played. Most of the guests liked the same kind of music and drugs so everyone was happy for the most part. Jimmy became a little drunk so he was relaxed, more outgoing than usual, and that was probably why his guests were more attracted to him than usual. This surprised him and he enjoyed the attention, especially from the girls. One girl named Jan seemed especially interested in him though she came with Martin, who Jimmy had known since the second grade.

Martin had protected him occasionally when a group of boys picked on him while on the way home from school. Martin also occasionally included Jimmy in group activities such as going to the movies or birthday parties, and the two became friends, though not close.

Jimmy made the rounds, making sure that everyone had a beer, or a joint, or something. He asked people what band they wanted to hear and filled their requests with Guns and Roses, Motley Crüe, and an ad-lib humor that was worthy of a disk jockey. After the party was well under way, Jimmy sat down with another beer and watched those who were dancing. He liked the way the young women's bodies moved with the music. They seemed to have a natural rhythm that the guys didn't. Some of the women had long hair that appeared to fly though the air and float down again.

Jimmy watched as Jan and Martin slow danced, even to the fast music. He noticed how she put her head on Martin's shoulder, and her hair fell over his arm. Her fingers accentuated her long, slender hands as they rested on Martin's arm and chest. There was no ring, not even a class ring. As the couple turned, Jimmy saw that her eyes were closed and she looked as if she were dreaming, pulled through space by her boyfriend. It seemed like the perfect scene--one Jimmy had always wanted to be a part of. It reminded him of his father leading his mother as she danced around their living room when Jimmy was younger.

Jimmy didn't move from his chair until it was time to put on new CDs. When he returned to his place he found that the short absence of music had broken the spell and that fewer couples were dancing. Jan left Martin dancing with another girl and went to the kitchen table where the food waited. After she finished filling a plate she opened another beer and wandered around the living room, looking for a place to sit. As she passed Jimmy, he motioned to an empty chair next to him where she sat down, balancing the plate on her knees and her beer on the floor.

"Good party Jimmy. I'm glad I came," she said, smiling and surveying the room.

"I'm glad you came, too," Jimmy replied. "Not too many people are here though."

"Sure there are," Jan said. "Besides, you couldn't get too many more people in this place. Your party is just the right size." She said it as if her pronouncement made it so.

Jimmy smiled and then looked at Martin, still dancing with a red headed girl Jimmy didn't know. Jimmy sipped some beer and decided to continue the conversation. At first he didn't know what to say, but Jan helped him by doing most of the talking. When Jan's plate was empty, Jimmy got her more food, and when her can was empty, he got her another beer.

When Martin finished dancing he came over and stood in front of Jan.

"Come on," he said. "It's time to go."

"Oh, come on," she said. "We can stay a while longer. The night's still young. Besides, I want to talk to Jimmy some more."

Martin laughed as he looked at Jimmy. "Girl," he said, "you've got until I finish another beer. Better hurry too, because I'm going to chug it down." Jimmy noticed Jan rolled her eyes as Martin headed for the kitchen.

"Sometimes he can be such a jerk," she said. "Anyway, we have a few more minutes to talk. It seems like I never get to talk to interesting people. I'm always talking to the same old people or Martin's goofy friends."

Jimmy listened to her complaints about her boyfriend and nodded in the appropriate places until Martin came back holding an empty Budweiser can upside down, the last drops falling into the carpet. Jimmy stood up as Jan prepared to go with her boyfriend and told them that he was glad they came and that they would have to do something together sometime. Jan replied that she looked forward to it; Martin said thanks for the beer. Jimmy didn't look away from them until Jan trailed Martin out the front door. Somehow, the scene was typical, Jimmy thought. People always followed Martin. Jimmy remembered even older boys obeying Martin's instructions when playing football or some other game.

As Jimmy turned to the rest of the party he found that he had lost interest. Even so, he dutifully put on more music, and made sure everyone had something to eat, drink, or smoke. Soon others began following Martin's lead and started drifting out, headed for home or another party. Jimmy saw the last guest out the door and smiled, saying good night.

Jimmy didn't bother to clean his house but sat listening to his music with the lights off. He sat in the same worn chair he was in before, replaying parts of the party over again in his head until he came to the parts that included Jan and Martin. He saw every move they made while dancing or while she was sitting next to him. At three o'clock he turned off the CD player and made his way through the dark toward the bedroom. He took his clothes off, letting them drop on the dark brown carpet and got under the single sheet that covered the bed.

He lay on his back looking at the ghostly shadows that were created by the street light as it fell through the blinds. Jimmy began to imagine pictures

in the shadows of himself and Jan talking, dancing, or embracing. He saw her naked shadow beckoning to him as he drifted into sleep.

When Jimmy woke up the next morning he did not get out of bed as he usually did. Instead, he lay there looking at where the shadows had been the night before. He tried to remember them but after a while he gave up and dozed for another hour before slowly rising and going into the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator looking for some orange juice or milk but found none. As he filled a paper cup with water he muttered about the guests who drank all his milk. When he finished, he threw the cup onto the overflowing trash pile next to the trash basket.

Jimmy padded to the living room chair that had been his throne the night before and sat down. He looked at the place where Jan sat the night before and thought about their conversation. He looked at the place where she and Martin had danced and remembered how Martin demanded a kind of obedience from her. The more he thought about it the more things began to fit into place.

Martin had always been tough with the boys he didn't know or like-- Jimmy understood that. They had been in several scrapes together with other boys as they grew up, and it was always Martin who did the fighting. Jimmy would try to avoid a confrontation but stood aside when Martin was angry and let him go at it. More often than not, it was a fight to protect Jimmy from someone else like the time Donny Pittman started pushing Jimmy backwards until he fell down. When Jimmy tried to get up, Donny started to hit him in the face, but Martin tackled the attacker from behind. Martin and Donny fought for half an hour while Jimmy watched. When it was over, Martin escorted Jimmy home to make sure no one else bothered him.

It had never occurred to Jimmy that Martin might treat girls the same

way--until now. As he sat in the chair with one leg hanging over the arm, he thought about Martin letting the remains of his beer drip into the carpet, and that reminded him of other times when Martin had been disrespectful to him. Jimmy remembered when he had been the butt of jokes or had been embarrassed by Martin's cutting remarks. Jimmy had always put them aside, thinking that such incidents were simply Martin's way of being friends. Jimmy now realized that Martin never made fun of his other friends.

At work the following Monday, Jimmy spent most of his free time sitting with another brakeman, listening to the rails clack under the wheels. His face brightened when an older co-worker said that he had heard that Jimmy's party was a great success. Later after the older man fell asleep, Jimmy pondered the party and Martin's actions again. He could see Jan's hair draped over Martin's shoulder. He thought about her hands as they rested on Martin's hips or back and later when she reached over to tap Jimmy's knee when she was trying to make a point.

When the next weekend came, Jimmy drove his old Firebird downtown to the Pizza Place where he ate dinner and then to Charlie's Recreation for a beer and some eight ball. Just after he walked through the door he saw Martin and Jan. The screen door slammed shut, and Jan looked up, brightened, and waved when she saw Jimmy.

"Hi there, cute guy," she said. "How you doing?"

"Okay. Who's winning here?" he asked, looking at the scattered balls on the table.

"I am!" Martin proclaimed. "Grab a cue and I'll beat you, too."

Jimmy looked at Martin who was looking for the rack. Jimmy's blue eyes were hard, and his lips grew thin.

"Have a good week?" Jan asked Jimmy.

"Not bad. You?" he said.

"I've been ready to kill Martin for most of it," she said under her breath. She didn't look at Jimmy when she said this, but rummaged through her large over-the-shoulder purse.

"What are you looking for," Jimmy asked.

"Money. I gave most of it to Martin earlier but now I want a beer."

Martin finished racking the balls on the table and began chalking his cue. "Break."

Instead of obeying the order, Jimmy walked to the bar and asked for a Coors Light for Jan, showing his drivers license. The old man behind the bar grinned as he looked at the plastic with Jimmy's picture.

"You're just barely old enough, aren't you?" the old man said.

Jimmy didn't reply, waiting for the old man to fill the order. But he didn't fill it. It seemed to Jimmy that the old man wanted to embarrass him in front of Jan.

"But old enough. I'll take a Coors Light." This time he made his voice a bit harder and it did not escape the old man. After a moment he reached into an old waist high cooler and pulled out the beer, putting it on the bar in front of Jimmy.

Receiving the change, Jimmy carried the beer back toward Jan. When he neared the pool table, Martin reached out to take the bottle. Jimmy tensed. He didn't like Martin trying to take it away from him.

"This isn't for you," Jimmy said quietly.

"I just want a drink. I'm thirsty." Martin began to reach for the beer, but Jimmy pulled away.

"It's for me you dope," Jan said. "He bought it for me because you took all my money." Jan then turned toward Jimmy and thanked him. Jimmy

handed her the beer and walked to the cue rack and began examining them.

"Well, I still want a drink," Martin said.

"Oh, all right, here! Take it," Jan said, handing over the bottle.

Jimmy's anger grew as he watched Jan lose her beer. Jan rolled her eyes and again rummaged through her purse, this time pulling out a pack of cigarettes and then picked up a book of matches that waited in one of the clean ashtrays scattered about the place. After lighting her cigarette, she dropped the flaming match to the old, dark, wooden floor where it burned itself out. Martin was watching Jimmy pick his cue, studying him and Jan.

"I'll break," Martin said. It sounded like another order.

"Okay," Jimmy replied.

Martin put the yellow two ball in a corner by chance and so he had another shot. He walked around the table slowly examining it. He took his time as he looked at each ball and every angle. He stopped for a moment and pulled a pack of Camels and a Bic lighter from his jeans. He lit his cigarette as carefully as he played pool. He took two drags and put the cigarette on the edge of the table. Slowly, he leaned over and lined up his next shot. A four ball crawled to a side pocket making a slow motion swirl in the smoke and fell in with almost no noise.

"I'm good, aren't I Jimmy?" Martin said.

Jimmy didn't answer. As Martin played the game, Jimmy looked the old pool hall over. He wondered how long it had been in business. Jimmy's eyes took in the place as if he had never seen it before. Along the walls, near the high ceiling were several hunting trophies. Deer, moose, and antelope with huge antlers and glass eyes looked at the small group below. Jimmy felt as if those bits of glass were watching him alone, waiting to see what he was going to do. Jimmy wanted to know too; he wondered what his father would do. He looked down to the floor and saw the old butts, matches, and cigarette

burns in the floor.

"Oops, a scratch," Jan said. "You're up, Jimmy."

Her voice brought Jimmy back to the game and he saw that Martin had dropped the cue ball instead of the seven. Jimmy walked around the table looking for the best shot and angle. He decided to put the six into the side pocket. As he moved to the position where he would take the shot, he came to Martin who stood looking directly into Jimmy's eyes. Jimmy waited for Martin to move, and when he didn't, Jimmy walked around him brushing his side. He didn't do it roughly, but he did it all the same.

"Go get'em, Jimmy," was Jan's encouragement.

Martin looked at Jan while Jimmy carefully lined his stick up with the cue ball and the six. As Jimmy moved the stick back and forth, preparing his shot, Martin walked around to the opposite side of the table where Jimmy would have to see him.

"You think you're pretty good, don't you?" Jimmy didn't respond. "You're not as good as you think you are."

This time Jimmy looked up at his opponent but didn't reply. He returned his focus to the game and hit the cue ball with a smooth stroke that confidently put the six ball away.

"Ohh. You're good, aren't you Jimmy?" Martin said with a smirk. His tone was low and taunting.

Jimmy didn't look at Martin this time. Instead, he walked to the corner to line up his next shot. He stood looking at the table for a moment and then walked toward Martin. Jimmy stopped when he came to the cue rack. He reached for the baby powder and put some on his left palm and gently rubbed it between his thumb and forefinger. When he finished he returned to the corner of the table. He glanced at Jan who had become still as she sat on a stool watching the game between the two young men. Jimmy bent down, and

as his stick slid in his hand, he said, "I'm better than you think I am, old buddy."

"Yeah, right," Martin said. "I can beat you anytime, at anything."

Jimmy's breathing was faster than before so he took a moment to slow it down and then rammed the cue ball hard, sending it crashing toward the seven. Just before they connected, Martin picked the seven up off the table. The cue ball went sailing into the corner pocket that was intended for the seven.

"Scratch," Martin said. He had a slight grin, taunting Jimmy.

"Put the ball back," Jimmy said.

"You don't tell me what to do," Martin said, no longer taunting.

Jimmy stood looking at Martin for what seemed like a very long time. He recognized Martin's peculiar expression because he had seen it before, when he protected Jimmy from the bullies, when they were kids. Martin's face was framed by cigarette smoke when Jimmy started walking toward him. Without realizing it, Jimmy picked up a ball from the table with his left hand and put it into his right. When he was four or five feet from Martin, he threw the ball hard, aiming for the head. Martin moved to his right, but the ball hit the side of his face. Martin fell to his knees. Jimmy's world went into that instantaneous slow motion that a great deal of adrenalin brings. Before Martin could get up, Jimmy punched him in the face several times, trying to break his nose. Jimmy didn't feel the skin tear around his knuckles. He only wanted to feel Martin's face crush beneath his blows. He wanted to see blood. When Martin was on his back, Jimmy kicked him in the stomach and ribs until he could hear Jan's screams echo into his nether world.

Jimmy stopped to look at her and was surprised to see the fury in her face as she began throwing pool balls and cue sticks at him. He dodged them easily, but he did not see the bartender with a baseball bat. The blow came

from behind to the left shoulder. The impact sent Jimmy onto the next pool table where Jan jumped on top of him screaming and hitting. The old bartender wrapped his massive arms around her and set her on the floor, telling her to take care of Martin who was trying to get up off of the floor.

Jimmy crawled away from the old man and got off the table, looking at the scene before him. His hearing began to clear.

“Get out! Get out of here. He never did anything to you,” Jan shrieked at Jimmy. “He never did anything to anybody!”

Jimmy tried to walk toward her but stopped when the old man readied his bat.

“Get out of my place,” he hissed. “You come back here and I’ll clobber you for sure. Do you hear?”

Jimmy looked at Martin slowly rising to his feet with Jan’s help. He saw scattered pool balls, sticks, and a cigarette burning a hole in the faded green cloth on the table. Jimmy turned around and walked out.

When he was outside, he didn’t know where to go, so he walked north toward the railroad tracks. He could feel himself shake as the adrenalin continued to lose its hold on him. He looked down at the side walk as he went because he didn’t want anyone to see the tears going down his checks.

When he reached the railroad tracks, he followed them east toward South-town where the blacks lived. He looked at the houses that were run down so badly they were little more than shacks. The unpaved streets added to the dilapidated look. For a moment he thought about living there, alone with himself. He could hide from everyone he knew, especially his father. He continued walking until he was on the east edge of town where he sat down on the tracks, and waited for a long time. He did not think, or wonder, or even see. He just sat.

A train whistle brought him out of his trance, and he left, going north

toward home. Jimmy was unaware of conscious thought, but he felt a sense of loss as he walked. It was twilight when he got home, and he locked all the doors, left the lights off, and went into the bathroom. Jimmy filled the tub while he undressed and looked at his shoulder, moving his arm up and down as much as he could. It hurt now and the intensity was growing steadily. He took four or five aspirin and got into the tub.

He stayed there for at least an hour, looking at the darkness in front of him. Occasionally, he turned on hot water on for a few minutes. He liked the feel of the heat as it worked its way up his legs. It made him feel safer. After a couple of hours, Jimmy got out of the tub, dried himself off, and walked through the dark toward his bedroom.

A light on the answering machine blinked red, indicating a message was waiting for him. He sat down on the bed next to the machine and pushed the button.

“Jimmy, this is your dad speaking. If you have time, let’s you and me go fishing tomorrow morning. I’d like to hear how things are going and how things are on the railroad. Give me a call when you get in.”

Halfway through the message Jimmy put his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands and sobbed, remembering his father’s strong personality making him friends with nearly everyone he met. Jimmy knew that he would not be the same kind of man.

WALLY STOGSDILL

Dr. Wally Stogsdill was finishing up with the last patient of the day. Glad the day was over and bone tired, Wally didn't think he had the strength to see anyone else. He told the patient, Mrs. Vonderhide, that the feeling in her mouth would return in an hour or so as he turned off the overhead lamp and dropped the mirror and explorer onto the tray making a metallic clack. Wally slowly got up and raised the back of the chair so the woman could get up, too.

"Everything looks fine," he said. "You can call if you have any problems, but I don't think you will."

The patient said thank you, worked her numb jaw up and down, and went down the narrow hall to pay the bill. She passed an assistant named Rachel, squeezing by her in the tight space. Rachel said good night to Wally as she put on her jacket and followed the patient toward the front door.

"I hear there is a new dentist in town," the patient said, stopping to talk. "Has he hurt your business any?"

"Oh a little I guess," Rachel replied. "Good night."

Wally watched the short exchange from the other end of the hall. When Dr. Ritter, the other dentist, was mentioned, he felt the same kind of chill that he felt when he stepped on graves, as a child. He looked at his shoes and wondered if the patient would come back to him next year or go to the new guy. Wally desperately wanted her to come back to him. He wanted the year to be over already so he could see what she would do.

Wally walked to the lab where he could hear what might be said without being seen, but the conversation was over, and the patient left with Rachel walking behind her. Wally started washing his hands with his usual precision and care. Lois, the receptionist, was still there putting things in order and entering the last check in the ledger. He noticed that Rachel had

not put the previously used instruments in the autoclave, and it made him angry; his frown made his jowls appear bigger and looser. He allowed the frown because he was hidden from Lois' view. A calm facade was important to Wally. He learned to create a facade when he was picked on as a child for making better grades than his classmates.

"Everything is done," Lois said in a slightly elevated voice. "The books are in order and Rachel said that we're set up for tomorrow's procedures."

"Okay, Lois. Have a good night now." Wally didn't say anything about the dirty instruments.

"Okay," she said. After a pause she continued, "It's too bad about what she said." Wally didn't respond. "The patient, I mean. We've lost a number of people to Ritter. We may need to do some advertising to get some of them back." She kept looking at the books as she spoke. Wally kept looking at his hands under the faucet.

"Oh, these things have a way of working themselves out," Wally said. "You'll see. Of course people go to him now. He's new. They want to see what he's like."

Lois continued looking at the ledger for a moment and then slammed it shut. She walked to the closet and quietly donned a sweater and scarf. Her face was hard and frightened as she said good night when she went out the door. She didn't wait for a reply.

Wally felt relieved to be alone. He was always a bit nervous when there were others there. He dried his hands, put the dirty tools in the autoclave, and set it for forty minutes. He turned out the lights as he walked down the hall but stopped at the operatory he had just worked in. He looked in, examining it. He saw the old x-ray machine, the scratched counter top that rested on equally old and beat up cabinets. The beige chair had several patches over the holes made by male patients with their screwdrivers, utility

knives, and pencils in their pockets.

"The place looks fine," Wally said out loud. "It's been fine for years and if people don't like it, they can just go to Ritter." Wally was still frowning but he continued to control his anger, even though he was alone.

He walked to Lois' desk and looked at the appointment book, hoping for a full schedule the next day. Disappointed that there were only a couple of cleanings, a filling, and a crown prep listed, he turned off the last lights, and went out the back door, locking it. He walked down the sidewalk to his faded red and white VW bus. After a couple of tries, the motor caught, and he drove north toward the high school and then turned right at Clay street. He drove eight more blocks, pulling into the driveway at his old white bungalow house.

He didn't want to be at home, it reminded him of the house of the poor people he tried to avoid when he was in school, but he had no place else to go. As he walked into the kitchen, he turned on a light and was reminded that he hadn't put any dishes in the dishwasher for two days, but he wasn't concerned. He opened the refrigerator and pulled out a carton of milk and filled the last clean glass. When he put the carton back, he found a large piece of summer sausage, some Colby cheese, and olives, setting everything on the old pink counter above the dishwasher. He then walked to the kitchen closet and got a paper plate, plastic fork, and knife.

Wally cleared a space on the table and began fixing his meal. Half way through dinner, he decided that he wanted more so he made macaroni and cheese which he ate without enthusiasm. When he finished, he put the plastic utensils and paper plate in the trash, and the glass in the sink. Wally went into the living room, turning on a lamp and sat down facing the lifeless fireplace. It was large with an ornate wooden mantle with red brick trim. Wally had had only a few fires in the thing but quit when he realized that the

chimney probably hadn't been cleaned in years. He thought about the danger of fire for a moment; he couldn't afford to burn this place down and he knew it. The place was insured, but the cash value of the house wouldn't buy a new matchbox.

It would be nice if it would, though, he thought. He flirted with the idea of buying a new house. When he was in dental school, he thought he would have such a place, but he was disappointed. There never seemed to be enough money even when the practice was thriving. He had blamed his ex-wife for his financial woes at the same time that she had blamed him. Together, they barged their way into bankruptcy and a divorce.

Wally fell asleep in his old cracked leather chair before seven o'clock. It was a deep and heavy sleep that left him tired when he awoke at ten, when he plodded to the bathroom to perform his nightly rituals. When he went into the bedroom, he put on a pair of satin, bright red boxing shorts with white hearts and cupids all over it, followed by a dash of Old Spice after shave. He turned out the light, set the electric blanket on high, and crawled under the covers.

Wally laid in bed for an hour or so, occasionally smelling the after shave. He thought about the life that he didn't have with beautiful women, tuxedos, expensive colognes, and respect from friends before drifting off to sleep. When he awoke at two a.m., he didn't move for a few minutes so he could orient himself to his surroundings. Once he knew where he was, he sat up, putting his legs over the side of the bed. Like his nap earlier, this sleep was not particularly restful. He sat motionless for moment and then rose and went to the bathroom to wash his face and wet his hair, which he carefully combed into place. Before leaving the bathroom he put on a little more Old Spice.

Wally got a Tab out of the kitchen closet and poured it, along with

some ice, into the same glass he used earlier. He carried it back into the bedroom where he replaced his obnoxious underwear with conventional jockey shorts and proceeded to dress. After putting on an old cardigan sweater and picking up a coat, he finished his drink and walked out the kitchen door.

The cold air made him shiver as he got into the van. It started on the second try, and he backed out of the drive without looking in the mirror and drove west.

At Main street, Wally turned north and then soon turned west again, heading for the nicer part of town. He slowed down when he got into his favorite neighborhood and slowly drove up and down the streets, looking at each house. He liked it when the porch lights were still on so he could see better, but tonight everything was dark. Wally stopped the van for a moment and imagined himself living in one of the houses. He imagined the pride he would feel working on the lawn in front of one of these colonial or Tudor homes. He sometimes pretended to be driving home to a family where he would put the children to bed and then study his stock portfolio in his den before joining his wife in front of the television. He dreamed of this life as a child growing up--the life his parents told him to achieve.

Another car came around the corner, its headlights surprising him a little. Wally began driving again and watched the car pass, slow down, turn around, and begin following him. Wally turned at the next corner but the car stayed with him. Wally picked up some speed and he watched the car do likewise. He began to sweat in spite of the cold weather. He looked in the mirror but could not see what kind of car was behind him, so he drove close to the curb at an intersection so he would drive directly under a street light. He hoped to use the light to identify his pursuer. The other car did not follow Wally's unusual path, driving in a straight line, and so was not well

illuminated, foiling his plan.

Wally's grip tightened on the steering wheel, and his breathing grew rapid, his thoughts running together. He was afraid of being robbed, murdered, or recognized. The car drew close as if it were going to bump him. The headlights of the car went from dim to high, flooding the van and forcing Wally to turn the dimmer switch on his mirror. Even so, his face looked like death with the overwhelming white light. Wally began to think about racing home. He hoped he would be able to get into his house before anything dangerous happened. He looked down each side street and alley hoping to see something that would rescue him from the anonymous car behind him.

"What's that punk doing out at this time of night anyway!" Wally's shriek sliced through the quiet of the van. The light flooding his van suddenly change to red, making Wally look like a demon instead of a ghost. Wally moaned as he saw the red spotlight on the car and began to accelerate beyond the 30 miles per hour limit, but then it occurred to him that only emergency vehicles had red lights. He wasn't sure if this was an official car though because there were no lights on top. After a moment's hesitation, he pulled over and waited, his hands still clutching the wheel. Wally tried to think clearly, but he could only wait and watch. When the single occupant of the car got out with a flash light Wally felt a wave of relief wash through him.

"May I see your drivers license, please?" The policeman's voice carried an authority that Wally obeyed. Silently, Wally opened his wallet and presented the plastic card.

"Oh, Dr. Stogsdill. I didn't realize it was you. I should have called your license plate in, I guess," said the policeman.

"What's wrong young man?" Wally said, trying to keeping his voice

calm. He could feel himself tremble as he spoke.

“Well, I just saw your car and I knew that no one in that neighborhood drove a VW van, so. . . ” The policeman let his voice trail off as he handed the license back to Wally.

“Yes. Well. Couldn’t sleep so I thought I’d take a little drive. Sorry, it won’t happen again.” Wally spoke without looking at the policeman’s face.

The officer assured Wally that it was quite all right to drive at night, but Wally wasn’t listening. He was still focused on getting away to safety. He waited for the officer to drive away before he put his van in gear and drove home, breaking the speed limit.

Still frightened when he got home, Wally scampered into the house, locking the door behind him. He hurried to the bedroom where he locked that door as well. After Wally took off his clothes and got into bed, he laid on his back thinking about the policeman and worried that the man had followed him home. Fear was familiar to Wally. He had lived with a fear of what others thought of him for as long as he could remember. That was one reason he became a dentist. He thought people would respect him and he would no longer have to be afraid.

A few days later Wally found himself in front of Mr. Wooyard, a new patient who needed a crown. After a few minutes of explanation, the patient agreed to the procedure, and Wally accepted a long Q-tip with a reddish-brown topical anesthetic in the cotton from Rachel, followed by an aspirating syringe. He adjusted the light and then proceeded to put the needle in the back of the man’s mouth, working it toward the nerve. After pulling back with his thumb and seeing no blood, Wally decided that he had avoided a vein, found the nerve, and thus emptied the syringe. The patient kept his eyes closed and thus didn’t move at all except to grip the armrests tighter.

When the needle was out, he relaxed his grip.

"You're doing fine," Wally said. "I just gave you a carpule of Citanest Forte. You might think of it as Novocane. Either way, you won't feel a thing."

The patient didn't respond or open his eyes but merely nodded, as Wally got up from his chair to leave the room while the anesthetic worked its magic. Rachel followed him out.

"Mr. Woodyard's a scared rabbit," Rachel said.

"He's a wimp. If he'd done what he should have, he'd be okay." Wally was angry with the man. "He should've done what was right. He should have taken care of his teeth. Then he wouldn't be in here getting them fixed."

Rachel began clearing away some charts and ex-rays that littered Wally's desk.

"It's good that this guy came to us. We need new patients," Rachel said. "We'll have to keep him happy. Maybe we could offer coupons." Rachel giggled at her joke.

"We don't need new patients," Wally said as if he believed it. "We're doing fine. That new quack isn't hurting us, and we'll get our old people back soon enough." Rachel stopped working when she heard the anger in Wally's voice and went into the empty operatory to disinfect the chair, counter tops, and whatever else might be contaminated from the last procedure.

In ten minutes or so both Wally and Rachel went back to the patient to begin the crown preparation. Rachel put a diamond burr bit into the drill and turned on the air, water, and suction. Wally picked up the drill and pressed the foot pedal, looking in the man's mouth.

The patient flinched when he heard the high pitched scream of the drill, and Wally had to wait for him to open his mouth again. Wally's

frustration was evident to Rachel and she silently mouthed, keep him happy, to which Wally rolled his eyes.

“We’re glad you like our little town Mr. Woodyard” said Rachel who was apparently trying to follow her own advice. “Where did you move from?” The man opened his eyes and mumbled something unintelligible to which Rachel replied, “Well, were glad you came to us. We’ve been hearing strange things about Dr. Ritter.”

Wally looked up in surprise but recovered quickly and started the drill, hoping Rachel would shut up.

“I hear he isn’t very ethical.” The patient and Wally both looked at her, waiting for her to finish her thought. “I hear he does back room circumcisions. Can’t trust a man like that,” she quipped. Rachel beamed as she waited for Wally to catch his breath and begin drilling. The patient’s eyes grew wide and his grip on the arm rests tightened.

Wally stared at Rachel, his mouth open. After a moment he regained his composure and put the drill into Mr. Woodyard’s mouth. A few seconds after the drilling started, the patient raised his hand and Wally sat back, slapping the drill into its holster.

“I don’t think I’m completely numb yet. Can we wait a little more or can I have another shot?” The man’s voice was shaky and his eyes darted from Wally to Rachel and back to Wally.

“You’ve got enough in you now,” Wally said tersely. “I’m not comfortable giving you any more, so let’s get on with it. The sooner we start, you know.”

Wally was reaching for the drill before he finished his sentence, and he started drilling before the man could object. When he raised his hand again, Wally ignored it. Rachel didn’t offer any more amusements but gave Wally his instruments when he needed them and she put the suction tube in the

patient's mouth when there were pools of saliva and blood, or tooth fragments in the way. Rachel looked at Wally's expression grow from neutrality to frustration to anger as the procedure progressed.

Wally ignored the man's moans, ordering him to open wider or turn his head. When the crown preparation was complete, Wally and Rachel left the room while the man sat still for some time, his hands glued to the armrests, his knuckles white. Rachel went back into the room to check on him and then helped him to his feet. After a few encouraging remarks, she told him to stop at the front desk to make an appointment so they could put in the permanent crown. The man nodded slightly and slowly walked out of the room, putting a hand on the wall to steady himself.

Wally still felt angry about Rachel's earlier joke but didn't rebuke her. He wanted to maintain a cool front, though she had already seen through it. He spent the rest of the day thinking about the new patient, feeling relief that he had some new business, and miffed that Mr. Woodyard didn't take good care of his teeth. He also seethed at the man because he didn't respond well to the anesthetic.

When the last patient of the day left, followed by the Rachel and Lois, Wally turned off all of the lights in the building except his desk lamp. It was as old as the practice and the pale green paint on its round almost flat shade was chipped. The light didn't shine onto Wally's face but only on the desk's top. Wally sat motionless for a half hour, staring at his desk thinking about Mr. Woodyard and thinking about nothing at all. When he finally got up he looked around his office for a minute, taking stock of its contents. The old metal shelves with stacks of journals, boxes of old records, and a few half-read novels were on the wall opposite the messy desk. Everything needed dusting.

Wally turned off the light and put on his coat as he walked. He looked

at the appointment schedule and disappointed to see only another cleaning and four fillings, went out. He walked to his van, started it, and drove east toward Main street. Wally turned south and slowed to look closely at Dr. Ritter's new office. The old building had been remodeled into a dental practice. The brick and little square windows looked quaint and attractive.

At the end of the block, he turned around and drove by again, this time trying to look inside, but he couldn't see through the glare. After going around the block twice, Wally parked his van in an alley and then paced the sidewalk across the street from Dr. Ritter's office. The sun was setting fast so Wally didn't have to wait long to see inside. The waiting room had white paneling, a fireplace, light blue wallpaper, and dark blue furniture. It looked as if the patients had gone, leaving the new dentist alone with his assistant, who Wally had heard was his wife. The two busied themselves cleaning the building and emptying the trash. When the couple began putting on their coats, Wally scurried to his van, to avoid being seen.

He drove toward home but turned around and headed back toward the business district, not knowing what he would do when he got there. When he got to Dr. Ritter's office again, he slowed down to look in as he did before. The dentist and his wife had left so Wally felt free to drive around the block several times, trying to see inside. All he could see was the waiting area and the receptionist's desk. As he went around the block again and again, Wally felt his stomach tighten more and more until he could barely breathe. A bitterness hit him in waves that he didn't want to withstand. He began to consciously allow that bitterness to settle in him and he liked the feeling of power it gave him.

After the sunlight had disappeared Wally left the man's office and drove toward his favorite neighborhood again. He remembered being stopped by the policeman there but did not think he would be bothered this

time. As he turned onto Center street, he spotted Dr. Ritter's blue Audi parked in the driveway of a large brick, two story Tudor house. He felt sure it was the same car because he hadn't seen any other Audis in that color in town. He quickly passed the house and went around the block, slowing down hoping to see through some open drapes, but none were open. Instead of driving down the street again, he chose to go down the alley, behind Dr. Ritter's house, but he couldn't see any open drapes there either.

Wally stopped the van behind the house next door, partially hidden by a tree. The street lamps and the light from the houses illuminated the dark alley, enabling Wally to see Dr. Ritter's two children, each taking a large trash bag to the garbage cans thirty feet in front of the van. The boy, who appeared to be about seven years old, and the girl, who looked about five, were in no hurry. Wally watched them as they struggled with their burdens. Both children were blond; the boy wore a Lyons jacket and the girl had a pink coat that went to her waist. The boy reached the cans first and stood up straight and taunted his sister for being slower. He then picked up the other end of her trash bag and helped her deposit it next to his. Wally watched the children walk back to the house and then sat in the driver's seat for another five minutes before he turned on his lights and left the alley heading home.

Exhausted, he walked into his kitchen getting a Tab out of the refrigerator and going into the living room to sit in his old chair. He left the lights off in the living room, seeing the place with the kitchen light. After he finished the soda, he went outside and picked up an arm load of firewood, struggling to bring it through the back door. He carefully put it next to the fireplace. He then crumpled some sheets of old newspaper, putting them under the grate, and put a few uncrumpled sheets on top. Above that went some small sticks with the larger logs on top of that. After checking to make sure the flue was open, he struck a long wooden match and began setting the

crumpled paper on fire.

Wally waited for the fire to spread to the kindling before he went to the kitchen to get another Tab. He returned to his chair to watch the fire and eat his dinner. He wondered if there would be a chimney fire and what he would do if there was.

When the fire got low, Wally didn't put on any more logs, choosing to watch the glowing embers slowly die out. It reminded him of watching the fire with his parents in the house he grew up in. The thought made Wally feel comfortable and relaxed. At ten o'clock, he closed the glass doors of the fireplace, proceeded through his nightly rituals, and went to bed. As he lay on the bed, he took a few deep breaths smelling what was left of the fire and his Old Spice. He eventually fell into a shallow sleep.

At a little before 2:30 a.m., Wally woke up. After orienting himself to his surroundings, he slowly sat upright. Sitting on the edge of the bed, Wally smelled the coals in the fireplace, sniffing to get a good sense of the aroma. Another minute and he got up and padded into the bathroom where he cleaned himself up. When he finished dressing, he walked into the kitchen and fixed some instant oatmeal in a plastic bowl. He went to the refrigerator, got a carton of milk, and poured it on his small meal. Wally put a spoonful of the mash into his mouth and stopped moving. Then he ran to the sink, knocking the chair over, and spit the oatmeal out, making gagging noises and spitting as much as he could.

"Oh damn it!" he shouted. "Oh damn. Damn that's bad." Wally's face contorted into several masks that only sour milk could inspire. His hands were turned into fists and when he got his breath back, he threw the spoon and bowl, which were still in his hands, across the room. Oatmeal and sour milk oozed down the white wall until it formed into a puddle on the floor.

Wally didn't think about the mess he had made. He concentrated on rinsing out his mouth several times at the sink and brushing his teeth again in the bathroom. After his second brushing, he decided that he would not be able to completely rid himself of the taste, so he threw his toothbrush into the sink and went to the closet to get his coat. He then walked through the kitchen passing the remains of his meal and the open carton of bad milk on his way out.

Wally's eyes stayed on the ground as he walked to his van, not once looking up. The temperature had dropped considerably but Wally didn't notice the cold even though his coat was not zipped up. He got into the van, backed out of the driveway, and drove west. He went through the nicer neighborhoods, but didn't slow down as he usually did, going nearly thirty miles per hour, instead. He kept his eyes on the narrow part of the street illuminated by the headlights rather than looking at the homes around him. He barely even noticed them.

When he finally went past Dr. Ritter's house he pull over to the curb and set the brake. Wally left his lights on as he sat in the cold, looking at the big house. He stared at the windows and wondered what each room looked like, how big it was, and how it was decorated. Wally tried to imagine what kind of carpet he would put in a house like that and decided a thick plush would be the only thing that would work.

He began thinking about the family sleeping peacefully, not knowing that he was in front of their house. He pictured both children as they lay on their beds, little cherubic faces on Barbie or Star Trek pillow cases. Wally's face grew tense as he sat thinking about the boy and girl. His breathing quickened, each breath shooting a burst of steam downward, out of his nostrils.

After a few minutes, Wally tried to imagine their parents alone in bed.

He wondered if they slept close together or spread out across the mattress, not touching. He tried to see their faces but he couldn't conjure them up. All he could find in his mind's eye were their generic forms on a bed, covered by blankets of no color.

Wally slowly turned away from the house and took hold of the steering wheel. After a deep breath, he released the brake and began driving. He went east toward his own house but when he got to Main street, he decided to go to his office. He drove slowly until he pulled into his own parking space behind his building.

Wally got out of the van and walked directly to the door, letting himself in. He stood in the dark for a moment, thinking about what he would see when he turned on the light. When he did, he looked at his dental office as if for the first time. He saw the old gray carpet, worn so badly under the receptionist's chair, ripped covers on the arms, rubber foam bulging out. As Wally walked down the hall he looked at the twenty-year-old posters that encouraged dental hygiene. When he went into the first operatory, he saw the battered counters and cabinets, and the pathetic chair covered with patches.

Wally turned away from the room and headed for his office when he noticed a squeak in the floor. He stopped and retraced his steps, hearing a squeak every other time he put his foot down. Wally studied the noise for a moment and then went into his office and sat down, his face tight and his hands in his pockets.

"No one comes here anymore," he said. "It's because this place needs to be worked over. It needs new paint, carpet, equipment, everything. That's what it needs." Wally sat upright in his chair, not letting himself touch its back.

"I'll have to start right now," he said thoughtfully. "I can't afford to

wait any more. Ritter will have everybody in town if I don't do something."

Wally left his chair and went into the basement where he found his drill, bits, a screwdriver, a putty knife, and some other things. He had to make two trips to the basement to carry his selection of tools upstairs.

Wally plugged in the drill using two extension cords and set it down in the waiting room. He then took off his coat and tried to put a bit in the drill but he had trouble making his fingers move because they were still cold. After exercising them, he finished preparing the drill and began pulling the carpet back using an ice pick to dig it up from the tack strip along the wall. He had to stop several times to move furniture, but he didn't quit until most of the floor showed bare wood.

Wally walked back and forth, putting extra weight on each step and bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet. Each time he heard a squeak, he marked the floor with a pencil. He then tapped with his knuckles to see where the joists were located and marked those as best he could.

Wally picked up the drill and went to his first mark on the floor where he slowly drilled into the wood. The bit went into the joist and Wally began putting a long screw into the new hole. He turned the screwdriver with a slow methodical precision, driving the screw into the wood until it was flush with the floor. He repeated the process.

As Wally went from the drill to the screwdriver, he felt as if he were on a mission. It took about twenty minutes to cross the room, his eyes focused, and his knuckles white when he turned the screwdriver. Sweat formed on his face in spite of the cold and it began to drip off his nose onto his hand or the drill.

His knees ached as he worked his way across the room again so he made two bundles of folded paper towels and attached them to his knees with rubber bands. He got a drink of water from the bathroom before going back to

the waiting room. When he started working again, he did it with the same intensity he had before, going from one squeak to the next, drilling and screwing, drilling and screwing. The drill's sound reminded Wally of the drill he used on his patients teeth. When the drill was silent, he listened to the light clicking the phillips made when it touched the screw, and the rubbing sound made by the palm of his hand pressing against the screwdriver's handle.

As he worked his way across the floor, he thought about Dr. Ritter's office and wondered if there were any squeaks in the floor there. Wally also wondered about the equipment Ritter had and if it worked better than his own. He particularly wanted to know what Dr. Ritter's operatory chairs looked like.

Wally started to imagine that each time he drilled a hole he was drilling in Ritter's office, creating a floor, wall, or counter that looked like swiss cheese. Wally's teeth clenched as he thought about damaging the other dentist's practice. He liked the bitterness that stirred when he thought about his enemy. As Wally's anger grew, his perspiration seemed to grow as well. His shirt was soaked through and the sweat that dripped from his face formed little puddles next to each hole he made in the floor.

At 4:30, Wally cleaned up the mess he had made and put the carpet back down. He managed to stuff the edges onto the tack strip with the putty knife, but when he got up he saw that he had left some small wrinkles in the carpet. He tried to stretch it out but failed, so he moved the furniture around trying to cover the problem.

Wally felt better after working so hard. He wanted to finish fixing the floor by the end of the week and start painting sometime the following week.

"Patients will like this, I think," Wally said as he sat down for a rest and another drink of water.

When he put on his coat to leave, he noted that moving the furniture did not completely cover the carpet wrinkle. Wally frowned knowing that there was nothing he could do about it without a carpet stretcher, a professional carpet layer's tool. When he zipped up his coat and threw away his paper cup, he left the building.

Wally shivered as he walked toward his van. He listened to his teeth chatter as he fumbled for the keys and started the motor. He drove away from his office slowly so he could look at it in his mirror.

"It looks like a tired old building," he whispered to himself. "I hope I can fix it up." He felt himself become tense as the fear of failure and the future settled upon him. Wally recognized the heaviness on his shoulders; it was familiar. He wanted to go to bed to escape it for a while.

Wally drove up to Main, but instead of going left toward his house, he decided to turn right so he could go by Ritter's office before going home. The lights were off, like they were in the rest of the downtown businesses so Wally couldn't see inside. For a moment, he thought the street looked as if it belonged to another world, dark and cold. He felt relatively safe so he stopped directly in front of Ritter's office. He sat listening to the engine idle, looking at the black deserted scene, and then he made an illegal U turn and parked. Wally didn't move for another three or four minutes, still listening to the engine and looking at Dr. Ritter's building.

Wally checked his mirror and looked around before he got out of the van and walked up to the window. He cupped his hands around his face and pressed against the glass, but he still couldn't see inside. Wally stepped back a few feet, still looking at the window. He walked up to the large door and tried the knob, finding it locked. He then stepped back to continue his surveillance. The door was made of squares of beveled glass, each about six inches across. Wally walked to the passenger side of the van and opened the

sliding door, and began rummaging through the tools, boxes, and what not. After a minute's search he found a small ballpeen hammer and closed the van door. Wally didn't look around as he walked back to the door. His thoughts were entirely focused on the task at hand.

He tapped lightly on the glass square next to the door knob but increased the force when the glass refused to break, in spite of the cold. When the glass shattered it seemed to echo across the street and back again, but Wally didn't hear it. All he could hear was his van's engine running and bits of glass hitting the floor as he reached in to open the door.

Wally put the little hammer into his coat pocket as he went inside, turned, and locked the damaged door. He proceeded into the reception area but couldn't see it very well in the dark. He decided to go further into the building so he could turn on some lights without being seen. He found the first operatory, closed the door, and flipped the switch. The room had wall paper with a small design. The chair and carpet worked with the mauve in the paper. The unscratched counter tops were obviously new as was the chair with its modern shape and fixtures. Wally walked around the chair, looking but not touching.

He sat in the chair Dr. Ritter would sit in when working on a patient, moving it back and forth and turning in each direction. He turned on the overhead light and looked to see how well it illuminated the work area. He then turned the light on and off several times, looking at its perfect paint on the metal and plastic parts. After turning it off, and leaving it off, Wally turned off the ceiling light and stepped into the hallway. He waited to let his eyes adjust to the darkness before walking down the hall and going into the next doorway. When he had closed the door and turned on the light he found himself in Dr. Ritter's office, a rather large room using the same mauve color scheme as the rest of the place. Wally stood looking at the fox

hunting prints on the walls. Each print had a spot light directed toward it from the ceiling. The effect left the room with a sophisticated atmosphere though it was still dim.

Wally found another switch for the main ceiling light but decided to leave it off. He looked at the books on the the south wall, grouped in small numbers with various sculptures and antique scientific instruments next to or on top of them. Wally walked slowly along the bookshelves, lightly touching the leather volumes. He put his nose close so he could smell them but the odor of antiseptic cleaning agents was too strong.

After walking all the way around the office Wally reached for the light switch when he spotted a file on the large desk. Wally didn't move as he strained to read the name on it in the dim light.

Wally's throat tightened as he walked to the back of the desk. He stood for another moment, looking at the name. He reached out to open the manila folder but withdrew his hand before touching it. Wally looked at the books and then looked back down to Mr. Woodyard's file.

Wally's fear and anger mixed together and his stomach grew so tight that he nearly threw up. He could only think about controlling his body's reaction. Fighting to keep the bile down, Wally opened the door, turned on a light and walked down the hall, looking for the lab. He didn't care if the light could be seen from outside. When he got there it only took a few seconds to find the small torch that all dentists have.

When Wally was back in Dr. Ritter's office he pressed the torch's button and adjusted the flame until it flared about three inches long. Wally bent over slightly as he pointed the torch toward Mr. Woodyard's file. His flame slowly danced along one edge and he watched while the fire spread across the folder. Wally stepped back and watched the little fire grow and then turned to run out of the building.

He tried to open the front door two or three times before he remembered that he had locked it when he entered. His face contorted as he escaped the building and ran to his still idling van. Wally made little high pitched whining sounds as he drove north, away from the Dr. Ritter's practice.

When Wally ran inside his house, it was after six. As he lay down he listened for the sirens and horns of the fire trucks. Wally trembled in his bed but his exhaustion overcame his fear and by six-thirty, and he fell asleep.

When the alarm made its high pitched scream at seven; Wally sat up immediately to turn it off, and headed for the shower. While he dressed he listened for the sound of emergency vehicles but still couldn't hear any. He peeked out a window several times looking for police cars with their lights flashing, officers with their guns drawn.

"Oh God," he said in a low pitched squeak. "What do I do now?" Wally's eyes were moist as he finished putting on his shoes. "What was I thinking," he whispered.

Wally walked quickly to his van, hoping that no one would notice anything unusual in his behavior. He was careful to not break the speed limit driving toward his office. He kept looking for the trucks or smoke as he drove south on Main but everything looked like it always did. A few cars and pick-ups were driving up and down the street, and Wally could see people opening their stores for business. He wanted to be one of them—anyone but himself. He had to wipe the tears away from his eyes again and again so he could see to drive. Wally kept looking in his rear-view mirror expecting to see a police car.

When he came to Broadway street he saw that Dr. Ritter's building was still there. Wally stared for a moment with his mouth slightly open. He

didn't move until a young woman behind him honked her horn.

Wally drove up to his own practice and parked in his usual spot. After shutting off the engine, he leaned over the wheel, gripping it until his hands were white.

"Oh God," he said. "Jesus, please. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." Wally's face was clenched and his words were choked by his crying. "Someone must have seen me and put out the fire." He was relieved that the building didn't burn, but he was more afraid at the same time--certain he would be picked up by the police.

Going inside, he walked directly to the bathroom and washed his face, hoping that no one would see his red eyes. He dried himself off and slipped into his office before seeing his first patient. When he felt strong enough, he went into the operatory where Rachel had just finished preparing Mr. Woodyard and a tray of instruments. Still shaky, Wally looked around the room.

"Good morning Doctor," said Rachel.

"Hello," Wally said weakly. "Mr. Woodyard, what are you doing here?" Wally's red eyes were big with surprise.

"It's time for my permanent crown, remember," he said with a worried look. Wally didn't move or open his mouth.

"I was going to bring my dental records to you but Dr. Ritter's people said they lost them. I hope that's all right. Do you need them very bad?" Mr. Woodyard's face was hopeful.

"I didn't know that you had been his patient before," Rachel said.

"Once," said Mr. Woodyard. "He's a nice enough man, but he charges too much. I can't afford him."

"No," said Wally. "We don't need your old records."

Wally finally sat down and began looking into his patients mouth,

tugging on the temporary crown.

“Rachel,” said Wally, “set up an extra carpule of Citanest Forte.”

Rachel looked up in surprise. To Mr. Woodyard, Wally said, “We’ll give you some extra anesthetic and a few more minutes to get numb.” Mr. Woodyard relaxed his grip on the arm rests a bit and mumbled thank you.

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