

Ancient Rites

I have just told my parents another lie and I am heading out to where I am not allowed to go. I am heading for the Kennerly place, and my parents have heard stories about the Kennerlys. On this evening Mrs. Kennerly lets me in the front door, limply glad to see me but generally not in a good mood.

"I'm having my pains," she says.

I nod with an expression of concern.

Her daughter, Dottie, has heard the knock and is on her way upstairs. She usually knows when someone is being admitted upstairs, which always surprises the rest of us. None of us ever hears anything. "It's Gil--I know!" she is calling. The stairs thunder at her coming.

Poor Dottie is a very large girl.

"How did you know?" I call back, she not even visible yet.

She appears in the doorway, smiling broadly and I suddenly know again why I risk severe punishment to come here. She takes my arm and leads me to the stairway. On the way down, she whispers, "Mom's having her pains again."

"I know. She told me."

"Was she holding her tits?"

This throws me a little, but I do manage to remember that her mother had walked away with her right hand pressed just below her breast.

"Kind of. Not right on them though."

"Uh huh. She's warming up for Dad."

"What do you mean?"

We continue in hushed tones at the bottom of the stairs. I see that Frank and Steve are there, playing pool.

"She thinks Dad's losing interest. There's a lot of pretty waitresses at his bar. Don't you think he's good looking? She keeps looking older all the time."

She stops at this and I am getting impatient. "Well, why hold her own tits then?"

"Oh, Gil, you're such a child" (but she laughs when she says this). "Those nice tits are all she's got left. She walks around moaning like that, then later she gets him to rub them for her." She puts a hand over her mouth to theatrically suppress a giggle.

"You're kidding. She thought that up?"

"Aw, she's got a dozen tricks like that."

There is little precision in the pool play of Frank and Steve. Frequently a struck ball careens off the table and bounces about noisily on the floor. I walk over to watch them. The hi-fi is dutifully working down a stack of hit 45s.

"I keep telling you guys that if you hit hard you shrink the size of the pocket by an inch-and-a-half."

"Looks the same size to me," says Steve.

I bum a Salem off of Frank, who is probably my very best friend at this time. A dark, wiry Italian with a slouching hips-first walk that my mother once described as "about to walk right out of his pants." He asks me if I'm ready and I know only too well what he means. I stall.

"Ready for what?"

"You know. The car."

This is to be the night we planned to commandeer the Budrovichs' large, black, razor-finned Chrysler which has been left in their driveway while they are away for the weekend. I really don't want to take the car.

"If we get caught ... "

"You said that," says Steve, still not actually looking up from the pool table. "You said that last week when I told you all about this. You in or out?"

"Out, but in."

Dottie is making little groaning sounds from an armchair usually used only by her. "What are you guys up to now? No good, I'll bet." She picks up a magazine and pretends to read it.

"Go get some fags, Gil" says Frank. "I'm out."

"Say please," I say.

"You smoked my last one!"

"All right."

I go back upstairs and discover that Mr. Kennerly is now home, sitting before the TV set. Mrs. Kennerly moves across his line of vision. She is loosely cupping her breasts and wears an intense expression.

"Can I buy a pack of cigarettes from you?" I ask her.

"Sure, come on."

She sells us packs of Salems at cost and we are thus able to indulge in an act that parents and vigilant store keepers deny us. Mrs. Kennerly likes me anyway because I have in the past made sure to earn my keep in that marvelous hiding place, that tiled basement with the pool table, piano, hi-fi, and big overstuffed furniture. I have waxed her kitchen floor, washed her car a half-dozen times, and fixed innumerable little items around the house.

When she hands me the cigarettes she suddenly stops in the middle of the act and smiles warmly at me. She asks quietly: "How are you doing?"

"Fine, just fine thanks.

"Good."

She walks past me, keeping the smile.

Later, I am in the woods with Frank and Steve and Dennis Wolf (nicknamed "Wolfie," although not in the least wolf-life). We try to keep beer-to-beer with one another. I don't like beer at all, and finish my first alongside Frank's fourth. Wolfie, as usual, has brought along something impressive: a porcelain container of creme de menthe, from which he sips delicately and then emits long "Ahhhhhs." We drink in silence mostly; this is more of a test than a pleasure.

Steve surprises us by actually getting the car started. I have already surprised myself by getting the car door open with a coat hanger as I'd once seen it done by a parking lot attendant. Frank will drive. No one challenges this decision, for he is probably the only one who knows how to work a clutch. His father drives big trucks.

The car proves too smoothly powerful to resist. We are deliciously thrilled to find Johnnie Budrovich's boast of the car correct. Encapsulated in rushing wind and the black of night, we fly on fluid wheels effortlessly around curves and up the steep faces of hills.

Now we are on a lonely stretch. Drunk beyond estimation, Frank gradually relinquishes control of the car to the forces that grip us. We slide between a long column of lights, the right side of which begins to move toward us. Suddenly we clip a light pole with a startling crash. The car begins to turn sideways. Between Wolfie and me in the back seat the porcelain container rises and floats in the air, and then we are upside down with our heads banging on the roof. Out the side window I see grass shushing by, the engine suddenly still. The grass leaves us and we are airborne. Through the front window I see a delicate net spread out to catch us. It is a chain link fence, and it gathers us in with a violent wrench.

Our grunting and breathing are the only things to be heard. My foot is stuck in the glove box and wants removal to allow Steve to sit up. Frank makes panic-inducing sounds from behind the steering wheel, which is twisted up like a licorice whip. Wolfie covers us with a mint-green vomit.

I get my foot out at last and Steve sits up, giving my delinquent leg a swipe. Frank finally comes erect and coughs. As we try to wriggle out from under each other, stinking like a giant green dessert, we begin to laugh. We laugh until powerless. A door gives way and we tumble into dewy grass.

Our sides ache so that it is difficult to stand upright. Forming a ragged file, we stage an escape from the scene as frustratingly slow as in dreams. I joke about the green vomit.

"The cops will find no blood, just that green stuff. One will turn to the other and say 'Must have been Martians'."

Frank, hunched over and holding his bruised chest, manages, "Headlines say 'Scientists Say Martians Lousy Drivers'."

Such remarks were very funny then, and the sight of the car over my right shoulder, punched in and twisted, of no consequence.



It is another night and I am back at the Kennerlys'. Frank has just told me to give him a cigarette and I am refusing to be ordered like that. He mooches continually and never asks. He wants a cigarette badly, but to get it without having to ask for it even more badly. He goes for my pocket, but I close a hand over it before he can touch me. I turn away from him; he grabs me from behind and soon we are rolling about on the floor. Ray, the latest interest of Dottie's younger sister, Cathy, laughs against the pool table. (It is Frank's turn.) Cathy herself is watching from a chair; as always, she has a little hobby project in her lap. Calmly, with a massive rick of blonde hair piled atop her head, she regards me.

"Fight back, Gil," she says. She sounds concerned for me.

"Why?" I say from the floor, purposely avoiding her real point. "All I've got to do is keep my hand on the cigarettes." I'm grunting as I say this. Nothing more comes from her. Her eyes return to her lap.

I at last own up to Frank, as we later walk back to our common block, that I just don't like being taken for granted. We are now far from the Kennerlys, alone in the black yards between anonymous houses. Frank reaches into his pocket and pulls out a dollar bill.

"Here," he says, slipping an arm around my shoulder. "I was going to save this for beer, but your friendship means more to me. Take it for cigs."

I am very moved. "No, man, you keep it."

"No, come on. I owe it to you for all those cigs."

"No, Frank. You need it more."

"Here. Put this in your pocket, you asshole." He tries to put it in my top pocket, but I put a hand over it before he can touch me. I turn away and he grabs me from behind. Soon, we are rolling around in the middle of a yard, grunting and hissing.



We are alone at the Kennerlys--Steve, Frank, and me--as they have all gone out and given us the run of the place. We are more abusive than usual of the privilege,

actually getting into the bar stock upstairs. Steve gets drunk right before our eyes. We do not notice it at first, but now he is acting crazy.

He begins by getting up and punching an armchair--at first gently, then with increasingly greater force. Frank and I are laughing, until the big chair begins to tilt over sideways and threaten to topple over onto a fragile end table.

"Hey!" we yell, but to spite us Steve wallops the chair (he is strong, pug-Irish, reddish, built close to the ground) and it falls over onto the table, which collapses as efficiently as if it were designed to fold. He runs into the furnace room.

Frank and I nervously right the chair. "What the hell are you doing!" I call into the dark furnace room. "How are we going to explain this?" We hear nothing from the darkness. Frank and I peer into the interior, listening. "Get the hell out here," Frank finally says. Still nothing. I fumble for a light switch and then we see Steve sitting on the bare cement directly beneath the glaring bulb, holding his head in his hands. There are sheets hanging from clotheslines nearby. He at last becomes aware of the light and, looking up angrily, leaps up and smashes the bulb with his bare hand. Before we can act, he bursts out between us and scrambles up the stairs.

We find him yanking the curtains off the kitchen window. The taffeta tears like spider web. We each grab an arm and wrestle him around the room, finally pinning him face-down against the floor. He begins to quiet, though he rasps out angry breaths.

"I shouldn't have done it," he says.

"I'll say," says Frank.

"I shouldn't have done that to Betty."

"What are you talking about?"

"I gave it to her in the damned parking lot. I looked down too."

"So what?" I say. "Maybe she wanted it."

"She hated it. I have to spit."

"So spit.

Steve begins to spit clumsily on the floor, his face pressed as it is right against the kitchen tiles.

"My mouth keeps watering."

"It's the booze, man," says Frank.

"I have to spit."

After a while we let him up; his arms are like rubber facsimiles. We walk him around the room. His otherwise pale skin is as red as his hair. He halts us in front of the dining room bureau, where we all peer at one another in the mirror.

"I've got no muscles," he says. His arms hang down.

"Nonsense," I say. "It's the booze."

"Look," he says, raising an arm feebly. "No muscle. It's not big."

"It's plenty big," says Frank.

"It's not as big as yours, is it?" he asks me. His face pleads at me from the mirror. I have never seen him like this, little more than a child.

"It's bigger."

This pleases him, and I see his face brighten. Now he turns to face me directly. He is smiling like a baby.

"You beat me in that fight, didn't you?"

"What fight?" I don't fight, and that is common knowledge.

"At your place."

"That was sparring, you dummy, You're left-handed, and you kept leaving your right too far down."

"I want to show you something," he says.

Frank sighs and plops down into a chair.

"Okay, Steve," I say.

"Look." He opens his right hand down by his belt buckle. There is nothing in it. As I stare down I just see his left arm move but it is too late. A white flash explodes inside my skull, and I am blind and cannot breathe properly. The pain I feel all through me is my own body falling heavily against the dining room table and chairs.

When I can again sort out my sensations, there are chairs all about me, gently moving and heaving as I roll beneath them. I see Frank with his arm locked around Steve's neck. Steve is going for the long line of cut glass decanters on the bureau beneath the mirror, and Frank is reining him in like a crazed bronco buster. As I watch, Frank turns him around and goes up on his back, holding himself up by grabbing

fistfuls of Steve's t-shirt. Their feet pound the floor terribly, and they shriek at one another as if they are about to burst into sobs.

When they drift near me I lock around Steve's legs, and we have him on the floor once again. Frank gets an arm free and punches him viciously, once, on the very point of his chin. Steve's teeth clack shut like a plastic model and the spaces fill in with blood. His eyes roll back and his lids half close. Gradually, with a quiet moan, he goes completely limp.

Frank and I stand above him, hoarsely trying to regain our breath. When we exchange a look, he touches a painful knob just about my temple. "You gotta ice that." Then, without consulting one another, we begin to clean up as much as we can. We straighten up the dining room, rearranging the chairs and lining the table where it was. We flatten the rugs. We take down what's left of the shredded curtains and bundle them up, and then take them and the table fragments downstairs out through the sliding glass doors into the undeveloped lots behind the house and toss them away. We then go back, pick up Steve, and carry him awkwardly downstairs. Out on the patio, just outside the glass doors, there is a trampoline set up for the summer. On the count of three, we hoist Steve over its edge. He bounces about like a dummy and gradually settles in the center.

When the Kennerlys get home we apologize for the curtains, which I say I had grabbed and torn as I slipped in some water. (We say nothing about the little table, gambling that it will not be missed.) We promise to replace the curtains, but no one will hear of it. Cathy and Dottie go downstairs with us and when the time is right we tell them what really happened.

"Oh my God," says Dottie. "Where is he now?"

We take them outside. As if by arrangement, each of the four of us stands on one side of the trampoline and looks at Steve in silence. In the bright moonlight his thick wavy hair and pale skin appear to have been cast in ceramic. The only sound is the soft suzz of his snoring.



One night at the Kennerlys I begin playing the upright piano. No one had known I knew how. When I begin to play, all other activity in the room begins to cease. I play my one Fats Domino rag, and Dottie and Ellie--a pretty, well-endowed girl from up the street--are suddenly beside me, watching. I go into two short pieces by Satie, and Frank and Steve come over. Ray and Cathy watch from the couch. I slide into a pounding "waltz" by Chopin and now Mr. and Mrs. Kennerly come down from upstairs. Between pieces I fend off their embarrassing comments with sharp little one-liners.

"You play so well!"

"It's all done with mirrors."

Slowly, I get them laughing. Before long we're like Welsh coal miners in a pub on payday: nothing is not funny. Gradually, the moment peaks and then subsides as its intensity is too great for only myself to maintain.

After things calm down Mr. Kennerly announces that he needs an organist for his bar's house band and wants me to try out. Everyone is excited. They are certain that this is my opportunity. I, however, am stricken with fear. I know approximately six popular tunes, not a single blues progression of any consequence, but a truckload of pieces that few teenagers would listen to. In a distracting moment I actually dash up the stairs with a hoot.

Frank and Ellie find me standing out front smoking a cigarette. He says that I am a fool, very hopeful for me not to miss this obvious chance. Ellie punctuates his more emphatic points by squeezing my arm and shaking it. But I am certain of my limits and refuse to reconsider. Ellie does not release the arm. She has seen enough; I realize without knowing how that she is in love with me.



I am walking through the Budrovich property and happen upon Mr. Budrovich himself. Because the car theft is common knowledge now, I am not afraid to refer to it.

"I was sorry to hear about your car," I say.

"It was real sad all right."

I haven't really stopped to speak but offering this comment in passing. Before I am out of his yard, though, he suddenly says, "The police know who they are, though."

I start just slightly, hopefully not enough to notice. I turn and look at him and find him watching me closely. I manage to look no more interested than anyone would at such news, and then walk on with a cursory "Huh."

Later I think that perhaps it would seem unusual that I did not ask who the thieves were, or why there were more than one.



Ray comes to dislike me because I am funny. He is the newest addition to the Kennerly pack. I knew him from before when the two of us caddied at the Sunset Country Club. He barely remembers me from then. I was among those who played mumbly-peg, told stories, wrestled and played practical jokes, all while waiting for a chance to be called by the Caddy Master. Ray was among those who were requested by name by special members; he would tell the Caddy Master if he was available or not.

Needless to say, he does not like it when I am the center of attention. To make things worse, he has the bad luck to time and again provide me with the choicest setup lines.

He is always up for an arm-wrestling match, and beats everyone. One night, I--certainly the lightweight of the usual attendees--am finally taunted into a match. Facing each other prone on the floor, Ray and I go at it longer than anyone expected. My arm gradually goes down and my face gets red with effort. I notice that his face, too, is red. I huff and puff and bring his arm up, and the spectators ooh and ahh. We go on and on and finally the gallery calls it a draw. Ray is displeased with the judgment.

Playing pool, we later joke about the match.

Ray says, "If I hadn't wrestled so many others this week I'd have beat you easy."

"We know, Ray. Don't we all know that, everybody?" I hammily appeal to the others in the room, who answer predictably.

"Joke on, Gilly boy. I could beat a little queer like you any day."

"Takes one to know one," I say, predictably.

He puts down his pool cue. "You calling me a queer?"

I miss the danger and mutter, "I'll leave that to your interpretation," as I lean down for a shot.

He comes around the table, pulls me back by the shoulder, and pins me against the wall with a forearm against my throat. With his face about two feet from mine, he raises his right fist and says, "Take that back."

"Take what back?" I ask.

"Take it back, you little bastard, or I'll bash your face in." He is smiling peculiarly. Everyone is watching, of course. Ellie looks concerned, alone in a big chair.

"There's nothing to take back," I insist.

"You as good as said I was a queer. Now you say I'm not a queer by the count of three or you'll be carrying your teeth home in your pocket."

He begins to count. Before he gets to three I say, "Okay, you're not a queer," but with an attempt to save face by intoning the phrase to make it sound as if I am reassuring him. This subtlety is probably missed by the witnesses; it is certainly wasted on Ray, who draws back with a big grin.

Everyone waits to see what will happen next, and the fact that nothing does happen does little to alter the waiting. I retreat to the couch and seethe in helpless frustration as I light up a cig and puff viciously.

"What's the matter?" Ray asks, sweetly.

"Nothing. Just thinking up pet names for you."

"Just so you don't say them."

He cannot lose now. I decide to opt for the dignity implicit in silence.

Frank looks at me with obvious slyness from the other end of the couch. "There's always the old equalizer," he mutters. He is alluding to a story that he recently told me about his father. It seems that his father always used an "equalizer"--a bottle, ashtray, or table leg--when fighting a larger opponent. The code allowed that. Though I imagine an ashtray disintegrating against Ray's smug face, it is unlikely that I will ever be the one to throw it. I continue to quietly sit and seethe.

Now Ray goes over to Ellie. He whispers in her ear and she begins to giggle. The two of them giggle together, sharing a confidence. She giggles with him, before my eyes, she who has become my girlfriend.

"What did he say?" I ask her.

She looks at Ray to see if it is all right(!). He smiles at her. "He said he wasn't really going to hurt you."

It is the final straw. I reach deep into whatever source of strength I have been equipped with by birth.

"You know, Ray, I read in article about homosexuals. It was in Time magazine. Did you see it?"

"No, can't say I did."

"Do you know what it said?"

"Uh uh. What great thing did it say?"

"Well, it said that guys like prison guards, or linebackers, or bouncers in bars--you know, big violent types--are often homosexuals, but they don't know it. They go through these meat routines--you know, flexing their muscles--to prove that they really aren't. Did you read that?"

"No. I said I didn't."

"Oh," I say, rising. "I'll dig it out for you sometime. You might like to know more about that theory."

I walk as calmly and as slowly as I am able past Ray. It is small ground that I gain back, but I will take it. At the stairs I turn to the group. "See you all later," I say.

After a long silent pause I hear Dottie say, "Goodbye, Gil."

Then I hear Frank say, "So long, Gil. Maybe I'll see you tomorrow."

I will be grateful to them forever.



On another day I am sitting with Steve in the Kennerlys' living room. The parents are away. The girls are on extensions giggling with a mutual friend, Mary, who

is supposed to tell off her boyfriend. Steve and I are half-listening in. Something that they are talking about reminds him of a fight his family once had with one of their neighbors. It began with the fathers, with a mutual refusal to do odd bits of lawn that bordered on the other's property. This had the effect of producing long rows of high grass in unlikely places. Then Steve's father poisoned the neighbor's dog and the neighbor, in turn, sprayed poison on several of their bushes. The wives were gradually drawn in, and took to screaming at each other from kitchen windows. Before long the children, too, were drafted into the conflict.

Steve tells me how he got the neighbor's son to pick a fight with him. There was always a sure-fire method of making that happen: just make certain references to a kid's mother. I believe the term he used was "sewer rat," but whatever the story, the other boy threw the first punch--which was what Steve wanted.

Steve soberly relates the physical damage he inflicted--a lost tooth, cuts, a wrist so badly sprained it required a cast. He does not gloat, but wonders. The glaring lamp that he sits beneath makes the scene seem like an interrogation room confession.

"Steve," I say, "did you ever think you might go to hell for that stuff?"

He is sitting forward, wearing an expression often shared by all of us--confusion and sadness, barely concealed by a wan smile. "Don't talk to me like that, Gil. I don't like it."

"You must worry about it," I continue.

He replies in very even tones, "I'm telling you, don't talk to me about that. I'll paste you, Gil. I mean it."

I leave off. That expression. I saw it on Dottie as she smoked quietly, alone in her special chair at the Christmas party she threw. I saw it recently on Cathy as she talked about Ray. Ellie, always.

Mary is now off the phone and the giggling group dissolves. No one knows a lot about Mary. She is only an occasional visitor to the house. Cathy and she are school friends, and even resemble each other. They are both small but curvy, and they each have lots of hair. Since Mary is as dark as Cathy is fair, they look like different models of the same Barbie Doll.

Mary leaves the little phone table, and Cathy follows her outside. Dottie comes out of the bedroom and follows them out. Steve and I are puzzled by this nervous activity and learn only later that a party is developing. Mary has just told her boyfriend to go to hell and he, unaccountably, told her to do the same. He even hung up first, and now Mary, taken by surprise, has gone outside to cry. Cathy had planned it that after the call we all would celebrate the breakup. Though things are not going according to plan, Cathy insists that the party move forward, that Mary will come around and be enheartened by the festivities. With a desperate look, Cathy entreats me to go out and try to get more booze and for Steve to round up stranglers.

I'm not a bad choice for this particular task because I've come up with a successful booze-securing method or two. I head off for Gary Butcher's house. I am between landmark adolescent stages where I am too young for a car but too old for a bike. It is a long walk, but Gary, who is twenty-one, not only buys the booze for me but drives me and it back to the Kennerlys. I invite him to stay, but he declines. I wave goodbye to him in the driveway, my fists full of Dottie and Cathy's change.

Steve has located Frank and Ellie (who will be late) and has had to bring along Tom Firsella, who is visiting Frank. Firsella is a morbid creature, mean beyond the usual flexing and tussling of anything we have seen. It is known that he's nasty to girls and may begin beating up a guy in the midst of general hilarity for no reason that anyone else can see. I recall him from grade school, where he got laughs by viciously alluding to the supposed defects of female classmates: buck teeth, pimples, big breasts, and the like. But he is here, and there is little anyone can do about it.

It can be seen that the party will never become a party. It starts and continues in layers. Mary, Cathy, and Dottie have already begun drinking. I'm on the phone with Ellie, who will be very late because her father and mother, normally early to bed, are still padding around the house. Steve is morose and merely nurses a beer. It is still early in the evening and I have never been able to keep up with everyone else's alcohol intake.

Gradually, everyone amasses downstairs. I try to reseal feelings between Steve and me by taking him on in pool. He comes around to me in time and we share a cigarette out back, watching the evening cool over that still bucolic swathe in the midst

of housing developments. Steve starts talking about something that he and Frank did to Ellie long before she and I began going together. They were alone with her at her house, and on an impulse they wrestled her to the floor and took off her clothes. She ended up slumped in a chair while they examined her body.

He states matter of factly that she ended up enjoying the attention, even though it had turned so cravenly lustful. I cannot really grasp what he's describing. My brain tries to arrange figures that I know to be Frank and Steve and Ellie, in a room, grabbing and forcing and resisting, but the images are so alien to me that I can't fathom what he's telling me. In fact, the Ellie who is still my girlfriend simply cannot be the same Ellie that he is claiming to have manhandled.

I'm still in a daze when Dottie comes out and sits down with us. Kind beyond human capacity, she is distraught by Firsella's presence. She tells us that he took one of her school friends, a girl known little by Steve or me, into the bathroom twenty minutes ago. I go inside and pause innocently by the bathroom door. I hear a foot tapping the rhythm of their fornication against the wall. I have recently heard the phrase "pearls before swine" and suddenly know its meaning.

Outside Steve is doing his best to calm Dottie. She is again relating episodes of her "aspirin freaks," as she calls them--nights needing ten or more aspirin before being able to sleep. "You sleep good," she is saying. No one has yet been able to see what this might mean.

Cathy comes out and tells us that Mary is very drunk and that she is worried about her. Mary keeps wanting to go to sleep. Steve and I agree that a cold shower would be the best remedy. Cathy agrees and trots off, but she's back in a few minutes; Mary is like a rag doll and can't be maneuvered in the bathroom. Steve and I go upstairs and find Mary slumped across the bathroom rug. Her breathing is irregular and there is a spasmodic jerking in her abdomen. I decide we should get her to throw up, and while Steve holds her over the toilet I reach around and slide a finger into her mouth. I wriggle the tip against the soft palate, but she is so drunk there is no gag response. While we try this, she half comes to, jerks her head up, and says she is all right. As we explain our shower plan, though, she begins to slump again.

Steve and I leave the bathroom but Dottie and Cathy call out that they can't get her clothes off. Under Dottie's direction we lend a hand. Because Mary's shorts are so tight, we have to be careful not to remove her panties too. The girls hold them while Steve and I work on the shorts. The blouse is hard too for we have to roll her this way and that to get her arms out. I try to remain the gentleman, but am deeply affected: Mary wears spotless white undergarments and my narrow experience has not prepared me for the beauty of a woman's body unencumbered by clothing. Steve and I catch ourselves staring time and again, covering up quickly with awkward movements that impede rather than further the effort.

At last we sit her in the tub and turn on the shower. Dottie tells us we will now have to leave because white underwear becomes transparent when wet. Steve and I nod as dispassionately as if listening to a science lecture and leave the room.

The two girls join us downstairs later and we all bleed off the nervous energy with laughing fits. Frank and Firsella are playing pool, and the girl Firsella was with is now sitting curled at one end of the couch. Suddenly, there is a crash upstairs.

We rush upstairs and this time Frank is with us. I discover Mary moaning and rolling on a bed of broken glass. She has fallen through the shower doors. Blood is oozing from cuts all along her right arm and leg. Cathy is next in behind me, and immediately pushes back against the others and falls, blanched and trembling, against the hallway wall. I begin wrapping hand-towels tightly around the cuts as Steve trusses her up in bath towels. Frank pushes into the crowded little room and announces that a cab is on the way; everyone exclaims at this brilliance. When the cab arrives, we hoist Mary, wrapped in a thick, terry-cloth chrysalis, into Frank's arms. Steve and I accompany him in the cab, leaving the shocked girls behind.

The cabbie gets us to Kirkwood Community Hospital and drops us at the emergency entrance. I dig all the beer change out of my pockets that I had forgotten to return and thrust it at him. Steve is already announcing the emergency in the waiting room as I get Frank through the doors. It is late. The derelicts occupying the few plastic chairs have the look of regulars. One of the two nurses behind the counter instantly rises and disappears between swinging wooden doors. We wait and now Frank's arms

are trembling. I place my palms under Mary and press up. She is out cold, almost lifeless it seems. The side of the chrysalis facing me is broken out in soaked red patches.

An orderly in a white coat comes through the doors followed by the nurse. He stops before us, looks at Mary, and asks if she has Blue Cross or something similar. None of us knows. He pulls up one of her eyelids and peers at her.

"Wait here," he says, and goes off again with the nurse.

Frank goes into a slow burn. He begins with a little mild cursing at the nurse remaining behind the counter. In the face of it, she bends her head more acutely over her medical transcribing.

Frank walks over to the high counter and plunks Mary down on it. "See this," he says to the nurse. "Dying girl. Get it?" He shakes Mary and her soggy head rolls on the Formica. The nurse says "Stay calm, they've gone to get a gurney," and looks down again.

We wait a bit longer and then Frank abruptly smacks a holder full of brochures with the back of his hand. The plastic holder smashes to splinters behind the nurse and the brochures flutter down around us. She jerks, looks at him briefly, then looks down again. "You do *not* want security in here," she states flatly and continues transcribing for the next few seconds and then demands, "Spell the girl's name," just before a white cart bursts through the swinging doors with an orderly on either side.

Steve pushes one of the two orderlies back as he approaches Mary. Then he and Frank take her down and reverently place her on the cart. Only then do we step back and allow her to be wheeled away.

After weeks have passed, when the bandages have dwindled to a few flesh-colored patches, Mary visits the Kennerlys again. Neither she nor anyone else speaks of the incident.



I am alone with Ellie at the Kennerlys. The last of eleven children, she is largely abandoned by her aging parents, the task of raising her left mostly to the residual

vibrations of a big family household. Wherever we are, we are left to do whatever we wish.

Our usual long evening together is spent much the same way. I sit watching a late movie in a big leather chair while Ellie sits on the right arm, her own arms linked around my neck and her head on my shoulder.

This night, as usual, she does not watch the movie. Every once in a while she raises her head and brings it around in front of me for a long kiss. She usually knows to do this only during commercials, but at times we kiss during the action. More often than not, I continue to watch past the smooth curve of her ear.

The wonder of our first kiss--the sudden plosive warmth of her mouth on mine--has gradually diminished. Kisses are now just the signatures of our pact: that I will stay and just be with her.

Ellie has spent the earlier part of the evening telling me what amounts to her abuse at the hands of boyfriends. One boyfriend took her into the woods and ended by throwing her bra up into a tree. Another got her into an abandoned house and, wrenching off her panties, grossly explored her with his fingers. Though she socializes with Frank and Steve at the Kennerlys, she still maintains a confused anger about them. They are friends but somehow not friends. To me, it appears that nothing significant has ever occurred between them.

As she spoke of those incidents I didn't relate those parts of her body of which she spoke to the person who was speaking. Just as when we once paged through her father's medical books, I do not associate the pictures of body parts and diagrams of processes, with the flesh of Ellie. Few times if ever do my eyes wander over her. Her legs were once referred to enviously by Cathy, and I have often meant to check on that. She speaks ardently of feelings for me which I have never felt, for her or anyone.

On this night we leave late. We kiss especially long at the doorway of her house, as is our practice. In bed that night I am struck by how often I am bothered by an odor that always accompanies her. It is only a mildly repellent odor, medical in character, but it is as if its effect is accumulating. Suddenly, I have no real desire to see Ellie again.

The odor, I learn much later, is that of Noxzema, a skin cleanser.



Gradually, Ray's dislike for me affects Cathy. Aspects of my personality that she had paid no attention to in the past--like my sometimes risky humor, or boasting about school grades--can no longer pass her ear unnoticed. Confident of her place as the prettiest of three daughters (the oldest is married and living in another city), and the one closest to her father, she takes to leveling mean remarks at me with no fear of reprisals. These are accepted by everyone else, who are quite used to the quick springing up of little feuds. To me, however, the experience of a woman's scorn is new, and I am not yet able to see that it might have little to actually do with me.

One of my school papers is chosen for submission to the annual Knights of Columbus competition. I am bursting with this news as I descend into the usual embrace of friends gathered in the Kennerly basement. When I tell everyone of the victory, Cathy quips, "What do you want, a medal?" It is a standard put-down, but executed with venom. The moment dies quickly away; Frank shrugs at me, and the sound of the hi-fi takes over the room.

Later, when Frank and I are alone upstairs, he tells me that Cathy has recently told him that she can't stand me anymore. I at last allow myself the luxury of anger. I begin blabbering fantastically abusive claims about her, using obscenities I have never before had much cause to use. Frank laughs, and this encourages me. My abuse spirals upwards, and I begin inventing stories about her, throwing in promiscuity and strange acts with animals. Frank is in stitches. I go on and on.

The next evening Frank and I are at his house, and I am relating the plans for my Scout trip to a New Mexico desert ranch. This is my parents' idea, one that they hope will begin the course of my conversion to purer ways. Such a trip would normally have little appeal to the pack with which I run, but I am nonetheless excited, and Frank appears just a bit envious. We are talking about this when the phone rings. It is Steve for me.

"Don't let me catch you around this place again," he says.

"What place?" I say, laughing. "Are you at Kennerlys'?"

"You come near here I'll paste your ass good."

He seems to be serious. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"You know. What you've been saying about Cathy."

He goes into details. It is all that I have said to Frank, but since it is not possible that Frank would tell any of that to anyone, I deny everything. Steve is adamant, but in the end he backs off just a little. Before he hangs up, though, he reiterates his threats one more time.

Afterwards, Frank denies telling anyone anything of what I said. I want us to go to the Kennerlys' immediately, but he refuses to go with me. He says he has to watch the house because his dad is on the road doing a long haul. I head off by myself. Dottie is astonished to find me at the front door. She pushes me backwards onto the porch.

"Are you crazy, Gil" she hisses.

"What crazy?"

"What are you doing here? If Steve and Ray catch you they'll tear you apart."

"What's going on? Why did Steve say those things?"

"Because of what you said about Cathy."

"That was just talk. I was mad. Who told them all that stuff?"

"Frank."

Once, many years before, a dear friend in another neighborhood told me the facts of life. I did not believe him. My father would never do that to my mother. He had never told me anything resembling a lie before; in fact, his integrity was of a level I have since failed to find in most adults. Still, I did not believe him, and the friendship broke up over the incident.

After speaking to Dottie I go home to a fitful bed. The next day, early, I am on a bus with two dozen boys my own age. We wear identical black cowboy hats and wrestle similar overstuffed backpacks. For the next two weeks, I tramp with them through desert mountains, pitching camp, foraging, carrying days' worth of food, developing good eyes for berries and fingers of cold spring water.

When I return it seems that months have passed. I am fit and brown as a nut. I head directly for Frank's house to tell him of the wonders I have experienced, but I am shocked to find the house emptied and locked up. My parents tell me that his father

was months behind on the rent payments and that one night he backed his truck up to the house and moved the whole family out. Supposedly, they were heading for California, but no one was really sure. There would be no forwarding address, of course.

I wander about the neighborhood for a long time. It becomes the longest afternoon of my life. Time and again I begin to head for the Kennerlys', but not then nor ever again am I able to go back.