

In the Arms of the Sun

Dad sent me a newspaper clipping, from which I learned that my brother John had been arrested for cutting down billboards with a chainsaw. I recalled a trip that John and I had made across the country and the way he had raved about billboards and beer cans. I had laughed. Now I imagined him out there in the dark, cutting away with that same sour expression. He had taken a swipe at a policeman, so things would go rough for him.

I searched the envelope for a note from Dad. Nothing. There was a time when he might have written something like "Now you see why billboards are going up on I-beams," but now there was nothing.

It was still fairly early, and a cool fresh wind caught me at every corner as I walked up Van Ness Avenue, tucking my single letter away in my pocket. I stopped in front of a Buick dealer's window and went into a dream about Johnnie-boy and me back in the time when he would not speak.

I took him to the Stephens farm--the last bit of acreage we knew of that held out against the suburban sprawl. It was dark, and we went stumbling and crashing through the fibrous blades of rhubarb, the old gentleman's final harvest. Finally John and I stood near the pond that had once been a hundred feet and frozen over in the winter. We crouched down at the edge and as the moon began to surface in the thrashing maples I told John that the old man had died and that the pond was being filled in and now the water was only a foot or so deep. By the light of the moon we could see the frantic, searching feelers of scores of tiny catfish. By the way Johnnie backed off I knew he thought they were water-striders, so I grabbed a handful and held them up to him. They moved in my palm like sodden slugs.

John started an unearthly whine and knocked my hand away. Then he was up and running away. By the time I picked the little fish from the dust and threw them back into the water, John was already deep in the rhubarb. I had a hard time keeping sight of his dark head. Finally he slipped into the clear and ran through the dust and wind until I lost him again in the silhouette of a parked bulldozer. I became frightened with the wind kicking up and the dust going silver in the moonlight. I half-ran, half-walked up to the

fearful shape of the machine, and there I found Johnnie rolling around in the dirt, clutching his knee. He must have run right into the thing.

I could not get him to stop wriggling and crying. I swore I'd make him eat dirt, or that I'd rub sand in his cut, or leave him there alone, but he kept on. So I pleaded quietly with him and promised that the pond and Mr. Stephen and the fish would all be fine, and that got him listening at least. I went slowly from there until he would laugh when I tickled him, and soon we were running home.

I came out of my dream and was surprised to see a young man of about my age staring at me. He was dressed in denim and carried a small, red backpack. It struck me that I might have been talking to myself.

"I'm just a little angry," I said. "The mayor wants bricks made without straw."

Nothing. Not even a giggle. He just stared at me through a mass of hay-colored whiskers going every which way. Then, abruptly, he went to the curb and stuck out his thumb, something hardly done anymore.

But Johnnie used to do it, always thumbing it around Diego and L.A. and looking so clean and innocent that folks actually picked him up. Mailer had called a man a "particular envelope of lust and anxieties and perhaps some goodness," but the substance of John was so much more delicate and refined: it would be found gathered in the corner, and when touched it would coat every ridge of the fingertip like gold dust.

"Could you go out in the middle of the night and cut down billboards?" I asked myself.

"Love to," I answered.

"Now wait," I said. "If you got caught you would have an arrest and may be even a conviction on your police record. You would have to check that little box on every job application that asks "Have you ever been arrested?" And what about the job you have now? They'd boot you."

"Damn you," I muttered. "You sound like the side of me I'm trying to get away from."

"The rational side, eh?"

That sounded too pat, but I opted for at least a partial honesty: "That's part of the problem I guess."

"Well, it's a permissible fear," I concluded.

Up the way I could see a long, uneven line of unsmiling people spaced along a bus stop. The knowledge that I did not have to work today welled up inside me like an underground spring attempting to burst through the surface. Then, just as quickly I became dejected at the thought that I had to wait for days-off to feel this way, that I was controlled too much by things outside myself. I sat down on the bench near the bus stop and lost myself in the numbing particulars of my cellphone. All around me the city was becoming quiet, darker. People coming in by way of the Bay Bridge would be seeing a bank of fog slowly moving over the city, reaching out from the Pacific like a huge claw. I got up to go.

I took the bus up Van Ness after all, but a little later. Few people joined me in the bumping, jolting ride toward the bay. Two old men with fishing rods got on. I heard a sound like sand hitting the windows and saw that the wind brought a spray of mist. Up ahead, a tiny Japanese girl stood beneath a tiny umbrella. She held a plastic book satchel under one arm with her fist tightly closed-undoubtedly around her bus pass.

The bus pulled up to the curb and its doors gasped open to her. My heart went out to her as she wrestled with pass and satchel and umbrella, finally settling onto a seat, her toes dangling an inch above the floor. She dropped her pass and bent awkwardly to pick it up. I snatched it from where it lay just beyond her fingertips. She said nothing when I gave it to her, nor did she look at me.

Outside, an old man slept on the marble steps of a spanking new apartment building.

I thought: "I could write a grant proposal to a silicon billionaire and adopt some of Syrian orphans, refugees from the war. Perhaps there are some like this little girl here. We could have a big Victorian house full of food and light and laughter, and fix it up to suit ourselves. I'd open a restaurant, a small one, and the children could work it with me. We'll have spoons and plates carved by invalids, like the ones Rodin had. And we'll drag in the down-and-outs off the streets for a meal on us."

I felt fire in my veins and thought: "This is passion you are feeling; don't analyze it."

"But it's not passion, it's a second cup of coffee."

"Don't analyze it. Accept it!"

"But it's not fire in your veins, you fool, it's caffeine."

"It's love for fellow man!"

"It's a java-high."

I screwed my eyes shut and bowed my head. The bus came to its final stop. I walked about the wharf with my fists against my chest, clutching my little dream assaulted from all sides by practicality. What would Balzac do? I wondered. He would go downtown and rap on the doors of city officials with his walking stick. He would be admitted without question. Chins would be scratched and the thought "Here is a man of consequence" would enter all heads. He would speak with such force and confidence that all would be persuaded to do what he proposed, and he would come away with loans and grants and a truckload of refugee children, and all of them would go bumping along to his Victorian house and spend the rest of their young lives climbing over his big lap and laughing with his big deep laugh.

And me? I would probably spend the day picking through the vinyl records in thrift stores.

I sat for a long while on a green bench staring at the vast, unreal bay. Once, a long white liner slipped quietly through the blue water toward the ocean. Coming from the other direction, a small sloop limped along, its sails flapping uncertainly. Soon she went dead in the water, and as the crew scrambled about, hitching and unhitching lines, I went into a dream about Johnnie-boy and me.

I had gone downstairs to where Dad read, fitfully dozing and smoking his throw-back pipe, in one corner of the living room. The big clock in the hallway banged out the hours of our lives, and I would often find Dad listening to it, his pipe held motionless in his hand. On this particular night, I sat down on the rug beside his chair and waited.

"A visitor is it?" he said. "What brings you here?"

I brought myself to tell him. "You know that Johnnie writes letters to me."

"Yes."

"Well, he just wrote one to me about the people at the Institute. I think you should see this one."

I held the note out to him, and he took it up slowly, and more slowly read it.

"He doesn't seem to like any of them," he concluded. "Only the lady with the stitches."

"Scar."

"The lady with the scar. She's the only good one. The rest don't like him, Dad, and they don't care if he doesn't get picked in the games."

Once Dad had sent me in to fetch John while he waited in the car. Some kids were kicking a ball with a black diamond print in the gym. One boy, the one that I remembered had a lazy eye, among other things, was walking back and forth along the bleachers with his head down. He shook his head when I asked him where John was. I asked others, but the hush-hush was on. I could tell. I asked the supervisor, a woman with eyeglasses and a whistle on chains around her neck, but she told me to wait out the session.

Instead I looked around for John, afraid that he might be lost with so many of the lights going off after five. I pushed open every door that gave and called his name down every corridor. Finally, I was collared by the woman with the whistle and dragged to her office, where I found Johnnie-boy sitting in the corner on a molded plastic bench. His face was red on one side; he was not a good-looking boy, and with the swollen cheek he looked just terrible. I whirled around.

"Someone hit him!" I cried.

The woman with the whistle said, "That little man gets to the best of us, I'm afraid. You take him right home, and tell your father to expect a letter of explanation."

So. John had upset the other children again, or run and hid again, or spit at someone again, or had screamed when everyone else was quiet-again. Dad would read the letter and nod.

I took John by the hand and he began to cry as if he'd stowed away the entirety of his feelings behind a door so thin as to break away wholly and at once. He pressed his face against the back of my hand as I led him, dragged him, down the hall. Before we went out the door, I rubbed his head and pinched him until I got him to smile a little. He blew his nose in my handkerchief and I sent him to the bathroom to clean up. Through the square window in the double doors I could see Dad sitting in the car. The glow of his pipe alternately lit his face for brief moments. He was staring out the front window at nothing I could see. For no reason I thought: "When the pipe goes out, he'll be dead." Turning around I was surprised to see the woman with the scar coming toward me. Although I was only

twelve or so, she always held out her hand for me to shake. And now, holding my hand in her dry grasp, she said "Terry, how lucky to find you here tonight!"

I was always afraid of her at first because of the badly healed scar that ran across her lips and part way down her chin. And she always came up so quickly and silently, like those ballet artists who move about the stage as if they were riding unicycles beneath their long skirts. Frightened, yes, but in my soul of souls I felt the ring of something genuine and rare in her voice, and saw in her wide gray eyes the only hope for John. Her regard for me, and her sharing with me all John's successes, disarmed my fear and jealousy.

Now she took a folded piece of paper from her blouse pocket and looked around before handing it to me.

"Here," she said in hoarse exaltation. "Take this home and read it. It's a poem John wrote for my class. Don't dare let him know I've lent it to you. I'm very excited. It's the first time he's ever referred to himself in the first person." She was almost on top of me now, and I felt myself bending backwards. "But don't make a lot out of this. Go slow. He's especially vulnerable after something like this."

I nodded, a bit bewildered, and she shook my hand again, twice tersely, and walked swiftly back down the hall, turning once to say "I want that back," then disappearing at the dark end.

I stood there, flattered to death and staring after her, until I heard the squeak of Johnnie-boy's sneakers. I stuffed the paper into my jeans. We went out to the car together and I made up some excuse to cover the delay. As I spoke, I could feel Johnnie trembling, though he appeared to be staring sullenly out the window, as he always did.

When we arrived home, John shot up the stairs to our room, as he usually did. I went to the kitchen for some milk, and as I sat down the paper crackled in my pocket. I drew it out and smoothed it flat on the table. I could barely decipher John's wandering looping hand, but it went like this:

Carry me from all winters,
I belong in the arms of the sun.
Carry me from all winters
In the arms of the sun.

I read it several times before it worked on me like the dark coruscant that it was. I went weak and pale as I'd heard it happened in tales told around campfires. I did not know why I was frightened; I attributed it to the stillness of the room and the insistent rattling of the screen door out back in the dark. But now I know that I was then seeing, for the first time, that my Johnnie-boy contained convolutions of spirit like the gulleys and ridges and valleys of a vast frontier that I would never see. I saw that John was John, and I was I, and his "I" scrawled in his own hand, brought forth a John I did not know, as yet or maybe ever. At that moment, I was the lonely one; I was the freak.

I folded up the paper and went upstairs to my room, where I found Johnnie-boy nearly asleep on one side, facing the wall. Without knowing what I was doing, I butted him with my head and made noises like an angry walrus. I got him laughing, and that spurred me on. I tickled him and then made as if I were a lion about to devour him. He squealed and fended me off, and when he grew tired of that, I made shadow creatures on the wall in a square of light that came in the window, and that kept him laughing until he fell asleep. When I peered at him in the dark light and saw no change in him, saw the same faint swelling on his cheek, saw his eyes closed and painless, I felt my fear go still. I fell asleep on the pillow above him.

As I recalled all this as I sat beside my father, I felt the same dreadful stab of uselessness that I had felt then in its nascence. I could not even speak to Dad about it. Since mother had left us, the fire had gone out of him--actually, a while before that day, and enough before it to be much of the cause for that day's arrival. I could tell him about the Institute, and he would perhaps reply that all that was necessary, that it was a long road forward for John, and some hard knocks would have to be expected. When he talked to me, or when he talked to Johnnie on those rare evenings, he sounded like a voice on the radio--just advice let out into the air to fall on anyone and everyone.

I ended by taking my note back and exchanging good-nights.

I came out of the dream with the same feeling of inertial heaviness. I could have lived out my days on that green bench. "Well," I thought, "is this how it begins? You think yourself to a standstill, and then follows the quick fade to mediocrity."

I recalled that Balzac always carried a heavy walking stick, and on that stick he had inscribed "I overcome all obstacles."

I spent some time walking about the wharves, examining the catches of the small boys and old men who angled over the high rails. I came upon two boys crouched over a plastic bag that seemed to be full of sea water. They were smiling, wide-eyed.

When I came up to them, one boy with long damp brown hair said "Do you want to see something, Mister?"

I said I would, and as I knelt beside them, one of them held up the plastic bag to me. It was full of sea water and in the center of it, like a child still in the womb, a shark of less than a foot long lolled about. The gills of one side were torn, so it listed in favor of the good side, mildly gulping for air.

"We've got a salt-water aquarium at home," said the other boy, who had short red hair and countless freckles joined together in wide, rust-colored patches. "Dad built it. We're going to put him in it."

"Who? Your dad?" I said.

The red-haired boy laughed and slapped his hands against his grimaced face: "Noooo! The *fish!*"

"Sharks need space to move about in," I said. "Otherwise, they suffocate." I showed them the tears that the hook had made. The eye of the frightened fish regarded us.

The red-haired boy asked if it would be better to throw it back into the ocean, and I said I wasn't certain but I felt it would have a better chance without the shock of being moved to new and tighter space. I added: "He'll probably stay near the wharf in the shallows until he heals. Then he'll be ready to go deeper. He's not so big yet."

The two of them looked at one another, and then the boy with the damp hair said "Okay, let's do it." We went to the side of the wharf. The damp-haired boy held the bag up with one hand and held a lower corner with the other.

"Let me tip it," the red-haired boy said, and seizing a corner, tipped the bag so that the little fish suddenly went tumbling through air, soon outstripping the feathering puff of water. I recalled with a start that hitting the water flat from such a height would be like dropping onto concrete, but fortunately the nose of the fish came around, and he slipped neatly into the green water.

"Gone," said the red-haired boy.

Afterwards, both of them walked with me down along the wharf. I was thinking about the brief separation of life and death and, hoping to make an impression on the boys, I began expounding somewhat obliquely on the sacredness of all forms of life, and even searched for a spider or cockroach to hold in my (trembling) hand so as to illustrate how harmless and life-loving even such small creatures were. I bored the boys to tears. They wandered about me in an ever-widening circle, until I saw them come together, talk a moment, then run off, the pocked soles of their sneakers flashing up behind them. "Gone," I said.

When I got back home I found John sitting on the doorstep.

As I fixed dinner for us, John talked and talked about his misadventures in San Diego. Nervous, nailbitten, he kept brushing stray locks of black hair from his eyes as he shifted first to the back then to the front of his chair, crossing and uncrossing his arms and legs.

"I took off from the Rehab. First night. All the supers wore polo shirts and had crew cuts with little waxed spikes of hair sticking straight up out of the center of their foreheads. Must have spent hours getting them right. A lot of them wore those strange black flight glasses--I got to thinking we were being guarded by blind men--and they all called each other pet names like Boom-Boom or Super-Jim. K-reist! I guess they all served on the same tug in the last of the great wars. Anyway, I ... left."

"Are they after you?" I asked.

"Who knows? I'm not too worried. I don't think they go after the small-fry."

I watched him as he spoke. He was as delicate and crackling with energy as a charged filament.

"I don't know about that, Johnnie. It's easier to get you than a monopoly. It was court ordered, remember"

"Good, good," he said. "I see you still produce old vague generalized non-statements. Some things can be depended on, thank God." He made the Sign of the Cross.

I smiled into the pan of sputtering hamburger and bits of onion. "Then there's you. Not even knowing if anyone is after you. Taking it all on. Might as well wrestle with a steam roller than go in with your head low against the law."

"Well, some people need a kick in the ass."

"Then why not get a law degree, or win public office, so your kick will mean something?"

John jumped up. "Okay, okay--I do appreciate what you said but it meant something to me, and to anyone who read about it. Politics and law! There's your goddam steamrollers." Immediately he added "And that's not it really; it's your bureaucracies-- those big, lumbering, impersonal machines who answer to no one but POL-I-CY. Boy, I got a taste of that."

"Alright," I said.

Johnnie walked around the room. He had gotten taller than I, but he stooped so that we saw eye-to-eye. He looked out the smallish window and rubbed his hand across his mouth.

"You're making me nervous,' I said. "You're so fidgety."

"You think they'll come after me?"

"I don't know," I replied. "What about the policeman you hit? That's what worries me."

"Now that was something. Two of them came out of nowhere. Only my second billboard, too."

"Why billboards? They're legal enough, aren't they?"

"Not these! They find a farmer or landowner whose land overlooks the hiway and pay them something to put these signs for their pizza or whatever and get around the laws."

"My brother, the vigilante!"

And evidently he was quickly getting good at it. One day rental on a small chain saw, wrap it in plastic because God those things leak oil, get a friend to drive you out to the nearest paved road, move at dusk but not at dark, cut a V on one side and a straight cut on the other and it flops right over. Two poles? No problem, cut V's on both and a straight cut on one and they both come down together.

"I kept trying to explain to the cops what I was doing, but they just would not listen. The one grabbed my arm and just kept nodding his large empty head and saying 'Fine, fine, now let's go to the car,' as if were the one with my head on crooked. So damned superior

and knowing--stuffed with righteousness. I kept thinking: "This has authority over me? This person knows better than I what to do?"

"So you belted him."

"Terry, I just wanted to...tap his chin a little. He was like a broken record that needed jiggling."

"You didn't hit him very hard then," I offered.

"Actually, I cut his ear."

"God."

"Yeah. And it bled as if I'd cut it off. I'm afraid that somehow the energy of my emotions transmitted itself to my otherwise ineffectual fists." John looked at his hand bunched up into a fist. "All bone, you see."

"Just like your head."

When dinner was ready we sat down across from each other on the rug in the front room and listened to records as we ate. On an impulse I made iced tea, a large pitcher of it, and we finished it off while wiping up the gravy with bread balls--something we had both done from the moment we were allowed to eat at the table.

When we were finished and had spread ourselves comfortably across the rug, John said, "We should go to Paris."

"Yes, and have our teeth cleaned," I replied.

"I mean it. We could take it slow, learn the language a little, and then set up digs on the West Bank."

Johnnie-boy rolled onto his back and sank, I imagined, into dreams of thumbing it up and down the little roads of Paris, and dreams of nights spent talking and listening to new friends as the Seine rolled quietly by.

Later, and late into the night, we talked about travel and Europe, and then John spoke of Mrs. Roneigan (the scarred lady) and the first days after he began to talk.

"She knew she could get me talking by asking me to tell her all the things I wished I could do but did not do. A clever lass. Anyone could fill a month of Sundays on that subject."

"Did she ask you why you'd never done them?" I asked.

"Of course."

"Well, what did you say?"

"You won't laugh?"

"Of course not."

"Well, I told her I didn't do them because I didn't think there was a me to do them. Actually, I didn't use those words but that's her interpretation. Do you follow that?"

"I understand something like that," I said.

The next morning, as I awoke to the harsh song of the alarm clock, the thought that I had to go to work fell upon me like a cold fog. With great effort, and only after repeated attempts, I arose and prepared to go...far, far away to a library across town.

The bus that took me down Geary Avenue was a different breed from the one that had carried me up Van Ness the day before. It moved like a fat somnolent bear awakened too early from his winter sleep. I looked out the window at a view that I felt was not mine to see; it was a borrowed vision, one that I had convinced myself was mine on loan, at least until the day that every apartment was filled with dot-comers. I told myself that I would readily relinquish it on the day that I discovered my true goals--whatever they were.

Our dream of Paris was never more clearly etched than in those early morning moments. But it was far away, out of reach, like a fine print hung too high on the wall, or for sale but at a price we could never hope to pay. How many setbacks and frustrations separate us from such a place? As many as there were miles, I imagined. And what of that? Is that not the meat of an adventuresome spirit?

At work I wasted the first half of the morning on idle talk, convinced that this was "being free," "being myself"--whatever that meant. But by noon my sense of duty (blind or otherwise) had more than caught up with me, and I paid for my earlier indulgences with hours of rushing about among the stacks. I began to feel the familiar clutch at my stomach. Still, in an ineffable way, every hour resembled the last.

Enervated, guilty of a hundred vague wrongs, I reflected before the time clock that last week at this time was so very short a time ago. I thought of my father who listened to the lie of the clock: "There is no time for a second life," it said, and he would agree in a cloud of seeming profundity.

Why, when my soul and mind ached for escape, did I feel our dream slip away like a flower torn from a river bank? On the bus home I was beset with little daymares as

bothersome as gnats. I saw Paris with its gutters clogged with styrofoam cups and cigarette butts. I saw glass buildings gradually violating the height limits of purposeful tradition, their sides plastered with advertisements for the most banal pleasures. And all around, hundreds of young people, my brothers, sitting alone or in small groups, silent or talking quietly, all lost, all refugees from commitment, some bored and not knowing it, others strumming similar chords repeatedly on their box guitars. I was suddenly terrified to leave anything secure, no matter how useless and unfulfilling it appeared, for anything uncertain--not, at least, while there was the slightest possibility that I was doing something "of use."

I thought of ways to present my second thoughts to Johnnie-boy. I concluded as I rounded the corner of our block that it would be best to say nothing and hope that he would fail to bring it up again. But when I looked up I saw John talking to a policeman and a man in a gray suit. I froze for a moment, and then I hurried up.

I heard the man in the gray suit say: "Seattle?" And John say, "Right, Seattle."

"What county?"

"No county. I'm from the city."

"Which borough?"

"Downtown, in the avenues."

At this point the two men turned and looked at me. I could see that they were armed with information from Dad.

"Are you the brother?" The inevitable question slipped out. I could see in the eyes of the young policeman a general uncertainty veiled by an impervious expression, practiced, still vague, but well on the way to the recalcitrant mask.

"I'm his brother," I said. John immediately played shock and surprise. He cried out, "I've never seen this bastard in my life!"

"Give me five minutes with him," I pleaded.

The man in the grey suit eyed me closely. He was a big fellow with a broad serious face, at the moment weighted with annoyance. He gave the policeman a slight nod, and the two of them stepped back a bit from John and me. John continued to fake surprise.

"Five minutes with who?" he cried. "Is this a hold-up?"

I shoved John inside the front door and into the living room; flailing, he hissed and cursed at me.

"You asshole! I almost had them convinced."

His innocence angered me. "Convinced of what? That you were born in downtown Seattle? Where? In a used car lot? And you think they weren't going to get around to asking for ID's?"

"I told them I lost my wallet, you shithead!"

He continued to seethe at me, sticking his inflamed face almost into mine. I thought he might hit me. "Terry, you don't know how incredibly stupid these guys are. Now I don't even have a fighting chance."

"Nonsense," I countered. "You don't have a chance if you keep up this fuss. They're not so dumb as you think."

He was listening, a little, so I hastened to add, "You've got to show them that you'll play the game a while." I felt that I had to justify this to him, and to myself. "Johnnie-boy, it just gets worse and worse, like struggling in quicksand."

John slowly quieted. The deep color left his face. He even sat down on the couch and put his head in his hands. "I do not want to go back to that goddam place, and it might be jail this time." He spoke through his fingers. He looked so forlorn that I was at a loss. I sat down beside him and put my arm across his shoulders.

I countered, "For a first offense, and a minor one? Not likely. Maybe a couple of months back at the rehab..."

"I hit one of them, remember!" His hands fell into his lap.

"I'm a legal adult, maybe I can get you released on my...what do they call it?"

"Recognizance. Yeah, maybe...."

I sighed dramatically, for effect. "Let's just play the game a while--stall, strategized, and then after it's over, Paris."

John turned and looked straight into my eyes, looking from one to the other, searching for any trace of a lie. It took all my strength to keep my gaze level with his.

"Thank God you said that, Terry," he said. "I woke up this morning and wondered about that, and you. So you're not going soft on me?"

I actually laughed. "What is this, a film noir? Not soft for a minute."

"It's still on then?"

"Yes, yes."

We sat together, quietly--so quietly that the clock in the bedroom could be heard ticking away dutifully.

"Time's up," said a voice outside the door.

I took John's arm. "C'mon."

He became again the child that I had known years ago. I led him to the door and opened it before him. The officer took handcuffs from a black pouch on his belt and I said, "Oh, that's not necessary now." But neither man looked at me, nor seemed to hear, and the cuffs went on undeterred. John's wrists were so thin that the cuffs had to be pressed to the last notch. They began to take him away, and he followed without a sound.

"Aren't you going to read him his rights?" I called. "That was done the first time," one of them replied.

Was that right? I didn't know, and the familiar stab of uselessness returned. I thought of John with two charges before him, besides the escape. Perhaps the cuffs were "standard procedure," but I didn't know, and perhaps the innocuous treatment was necessary in an emotional situation, but I didn't know. I had already reflected on what I could do for John: I could get him a lawyer, and save every nickel from my salary for our trip to Paris. Things I could do--instead of something foolish, of course. But now it seemed that I had delivered John to the numb extension of an insensitive institution. And even more, I knew, and more and more as I watched John being led to the car, that the boy would bolt in a week or two. He would give it a try for a while, and then fly.

With growing uneasiness, I thought: "They won't know John; they won't have the time. It will just look bad to them." Then I was walking to the side of the prowler car.

"I have to speak to him for a moment," I said. I got my hand on the chain of the handcuffs. The officer looked across the car roof to the man in the gray suit, and their gazes met in an inaudible "no," but held for a moment like a frame in a movie when the film breaks, and at that moment I yanked John nearly out of his shoes, and ran, incredibly and painstakingly slowly, backwards toward the door.

The officer was just getting up from where he had fallen by the curb as I reached my hand back for the door handle, finding it, fumbling with it, and it finally giving and the door falling open behind us as the officer was just getting a hand on John.

I beat at his hand with mine while pulling John in with all the strength my feet and arms and knees could bring to bear. At last, with the man in the grey suit a step away, I managed to drag John in enough to slam the door twice, hard, against the policeman's forearm. He fell back, cursing, the door went closed, and I twisted shut the bolt. They went at the door right away, and hard.

John and I crawled, ran, stumbled down the hall and into the bedroom, waiting for the front door to go. We pushed the bureau in front of the door, and as we wrestled the chest of drawers into place, the front door went with a splintering wrench.

We scrambled to prop ourselves with our backs against the chest of drawers, and waited. We heard footsteps and our breathing; then, there was a banging and pushing at our backs that jarred us a little.

John said: "Shee-it!"

We don't have a plan or a prayer, I thought. Then I thought of something. "We'll get this into the papers," I said. "Then they'll be careful how they treat you."

"You mean *us*!" John howled.

The banging stopped and there was some conversing. I reached backwards for my phone and dialed information. I waited forever for a robomenu to play through and then the call went through.

"Madness," said John, giggling like an idiot.

As the phone rang on the other end, I heard new footsteps in the hall, more talking, then as someone answered the phone, a new and more powerful pressure--steady, laced with grunting.

"Give me a reporter, please," I whispered hoarsely. "The police are breaking in to my apartment."

A woman said, "Just hold on, I'll connect you," as calmly as if she got calls like this ten times a day. Still, I cried "Hurry!" but to no one. There were clicking sounds and a new ringing tone. More talking outside the door. More than two people out there now. John saw a face at the window and pointed. Someone outside the door said, "It's got to be now,

boys, or it will just be worse later." Always worse, never better, I thought. The ringing continued but then the bureaus suddenly lurched forward with such force that John and I had to dig our heels into the slippery carpet. A shoulder appeared in the doorway as I looked back to see.

"The earthworks are fucking crumbling!" cried John. The absurd cuff chains rattled as he pushed back with his hands.

"Hello?" I said. Had I heard someone? "Yes. This is the city desk."

The bureaus lurched again, and I lost the phone. It bounced about on the carpet, but just within reach. Finally I got it back to my ear.

"What are you doing? Driving nails?"

"My brother and I are being arrested!" I shouted.

"What is your location?"

"Do you believe me?" I cried. "Are you listening?"

"I'm absolutely listening, yes."

As I blurted out what I could about John, my heels sliding slowly forward on the rug and John still giggling with fear and excitement, a voice inside my head kept screaming, "This is what it's like to be alive!"--over and over, loudly, as if to drown out every whisper of doubt.