

My Brother's Keeper

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All this happened a long time ago. Exactly when doesn't matter, not in a time when you can smoke your coke and Mommy and Daddy lock their grass in the liquor cabinet so Junior can't toke up at their expense. I used to think of it as a relevant episode, from a time when lots of things were relevant. It wasn't long before everyone got burned out on relevance. Hey, don't feel too guilty, bad, smug, perplexed. There'll be something else, you know there will. It's coming in, right along with your ship.

In those days, I was still in the midst of my triumphant rise out of the ghetto (not all white chicks are found under a suburb). I was still energized and revelling at the sight of upturned faces beaming at me, saying, "Good luck, China, you're gonna be something some day!" as I floated heavenward attached to a college scholarship. My family's pride wore out some time after my second visit home.

Higher education was one thing, high-mindedness was another. I was puffed up with delusions of better and my parents kept sticking pins in me, trying to make the swelling go down so they could see me better. I stopped going home for a while. I stopped writing, too. But my mother's letters came as frequently as ever: *Your sister Rose is pregnant again, pray God she doesn't lose this one, it could kill her; your sister Aurelia is skipping school, running around, I wish you'd come home and talk to her; and your brother Joe... your brother Joe... your brother Joe.*

My brother Joe. As though she had to identify him. I had one brother and that was Joe. My brother Joe, the original lost boy. Second oldest in the family, two years older than me, first to put a spike in his arm. Sometimes we could be close, Joe and me, squeezed between the brackets of Rose and Aurelia. He was a boner, the lone male among the daughters. Chip off the old block. Nature's middle finger to my father.

My brother Joe, the disposable man. He had no innate talents, not many learned skills other than finding a vein. He wasn't good-looking and junkies aren't known for their scintillating personalities or their sexual prowess or their kind and generous hearts. The family wasn't crazy about him; Rose wouldn't let him near her kids, Aurelia avoided him. Sometimes I wasn't sure how deep my love for him went. Junkies need love but they need a fix more. Between fixes, he could find the odd moment to wave me goodbye from the old life.

Hey, Joe, I'd say. What the hell, huh?

If you have to ask, babe, you don't really want to know. Already looking for another vein. Grinning with the end of a belt between his teeth.

My brother Joe was why I finally broke down and went home between semesters instead of going to suburban Connecticut with my room-mate. Marlene had painted me a bright picture of scenic walks through pristine snow, leisurely shopping trips to boutiques that sold Mucha prints and glass beads, and then, hot chocolate by the hearth, each of us wrapped in an Afghan crocheted by a grandmother with prematurely red hair and an awful lot of money.

Marlene admitted her family was far less relevant than mine, but what were vacations for? I agreed and was packing my bag when Joe's postcard arrived.

Dear China, They threw me out for the last time. That was all, on the back of a map of Cape Cod. Words were something else not at his command. But he'd gone to the trouble of buying a stamp and sending it to the right address.

The parents had taken to throwing him out the last year I'd lived at home. There hadn't been anything I could do about it then and I didn't know what Joe thought I could do about it now but I called it off with Marlene anyway. She said she'd leave it open in case I could get away before classes started again. Just phone so Mummy could break out the extra linens. Marlene was a good sort. She survived relevance admirably. In the end, it was hedonism that got her.

I took a bus home, parked my bag in a locker in the bus station and went for a look around. I never went straight to my parents' apartment when I came back. I had to decompress before I went home to be their daughter, the stuck-up college snot-nose.

It was already dark and the temperature well south of freezing. Old snow lined the empty streets. You had to know where to look for the action in winter. Junkies wore coats for only as long as it took to sell them. What the hell, junkies were always cold anyway. I toured; no luck. It was late enough that anyone wanting to score already had and was nodding off somewhere. Streep's Lunch was one place to go after getting loaded, so I went there.

Streep's wasn't even half full, segregated in the usual way —

straights by the windows, hopheads near the juke-box and toilets, cops and strangers at the U-shaped counter in the middle. Jake Streep didn't like the junkies but he didn't bother them unless they nodded out in the booths. The junkies tried to keep the juke-box going so they'd stay awake but apparently no one had any quarters right now. The black and purple machine (Muzik Master) stood silent, its lights flashing on and off inanely.

Joe wasn't there but some of his friends were crammed into a booth, all on the nod. They didn't notice me come in any more than they noticed Jake Streep was just about ready to throw them out. Only one of them seemed to be dressed warmly enough; I couldn't place him. I just vaguely recognized the guy he was half leaning on. I slid into the booth next to the two people sitting across from them, a lanky guy named Farmer and Stacey, who functioned more like his shadow than his girlfriend. I gave Farmer a sharp poke in the ribs and kicked one of the guys across from me. Farmer came to life with a grunt, jerking away from me and rousing Stacey.

"I'm awake, chrissakes." Farmer's head bobbed while he tried to get me in focus. A smile of realization spread across his dead face. "Oh. China. Hey, wow." He nudged Stacey. "It's China."

"Where?" Stacey leaned forward heavily. She blinked at me several times, started to nod out again and revived. "Oh. Wow. You're back. What happened?" She smeared her dark hair out of her face with one hand.

"Someone kicked me," said the guy I vaguely knew. I recognized him now. George Something-Or-Other. I'd gone to high school with him.

"Classes are out," I told Stacey.

Perplexed, she started to fade away.

"Vacation," I clarified.

"Oh. Okay." She hung on Farmer's shoulder as though they were in deep water and she couldn't swim. "You didn't quit?"

"I didn't quit."

She giggled. "That's great. Vacation. We never get vacation. We have to be us all the time."

"Shut up." Farmer made a half-hearted attempt to push her away.

"Hey. You kick me?" asked George Whoever, scratching his face.

"Sorry. It was an accident. Anyone seen Joe lately?"

Farmer scrubbed his cheek with his palm. "Ain't he in here?" He tried to look around. "I thought..." His bloodshot gaze came back to me blank. In the act of turning his head, he'd forgotten what we were talking about.

"Joe isn't here. I checked."

"You sure?" Farmer's head dropped. "Light's so bad in here, you can't see nothing, hardly."

I pulled him up against the back of the seat. "I'm sure, Farmer. Do you remember seeing him at all lately?"

His mouth opened a little. A thought was struggling through the warm ooze of his mind. "Oh. Yeah, *yeah*. Joe's been gone a couple days." He rolled his head around to Stacey. "Today Thursday?"

Stacey made a face. "Hey, do I look like a fuckin' calendar to you?"

The guy next to George woke up and smiled at nothing. "Everybody get off?" he asked. He couldn't have been more than fifteen and still looked pretty good, relatively clean and healthy. The only one with a coat. Babe in Joyland.

"When did you see Joe last, Farmer?" I asked.

"Who?" Farmer frowned with woozy suspicion.

"Joe. My brother Joe."

"Joe's your brother?" said the kid, grinning like a drowsy angel. "I know Joe. He's a friend of mine."

"No, he's not," I told him. "Do you know where he is?"

"Nope." He slumped against the back of the seat and closed his eyes.

"Hey," said Stacey, "you wanna go smoke some grass? That's a college drug, ain't it? Tommy Barrow's got some. Let's all go to Tommy Barrow's and smoke grass like college kids."

"Shut *up*" said Farmer irritably. He seemed a little more alert now.

"Tommy's outa town, I'm tryin' to think here." He put a heavy hand on my shoulder. "The other day, Joe was around. With this older woman. Older, you know?"

"Where?"

"You know, around. Just around. No place special. In here. Driving around. Just around."

I yawned. Their lethargy was contagious but I hadn't started scratching my face with sympathetic quinine itch yet. "Who is she? Anyone know her?"

"His connection. His *new* connection," Stacey said in a sudden burst

of lucidity. "I remember. He said she was going to set him up nice. He said she had some good sources."

"Yeah. *Yeah*," Farmer said. "That's it. She's with some distributor or something."

"What's her name?"

Farmer and Stacey looked at me. Names, sure. "Blonde," said Farmer. "Lotta money."

"And a car," George put in, sitting up and wiping his nose on his sleeve. "Like a Caddy or something."

"Caddy, shit. You think anything ain't a Volkswagen's a Caddy," Farmer said.

"It's a big white Caddy," George insisted. "I saw it."

"I saw it, too, and it ain't no Caddy."

"Where'd you see it?" I asked George.

"Seventeenth Street." He smiled dreamily. "It's gotta tape deck."

"*Where* on Seventeenth?"

"Like near Foster Circle, down there. Joe said she's got two speakers in the back. That's so cool."

"Okay, thanks. I guess I'll have a look around."

"Whoa." Farmer grabbed my arm. "It ain't there *now*. You kidding? I don't know where they are. Nobody knows."

"Farmer, I've got to find Joe. He wrote me at school. The parents threw him out and I've got to find him."

"Hey, he's okay. I told you, he's with this woman. Staying with her, probably."

I started to get up.

"Okay, *okay*" Farmer said. "Look, we're gonna see Priscilla tomorrow. She knows how to find him. Tomorrow."

I sighed. With junkies, everything was going to happen tomorrow.

"When will you be seeing her?"

"Noon. You meet us here, okay?"

"Okay."

Streep glared at me as I left. At least the junkies bought coffee.

I thought about going down to Foster Circle anyway. It was a traffic island some idealistic mayor had decided to beautify with grass and flowers and park benches. Now it was just another junkie hangout the straights avoided even in daytime. It wasn't likely anyone would be hanging out there now, certainly not anyone who wanted to see me. I trudged back to the bus station, picked up my bag, and went to my parents' place.

I hadn't told my parents to expect me but they didn't seem terribly surprised when I let myself in. My father was watching TV in the living-room while my mother kept busy in the kitchen. The ail-American nuclear salt of the earth. My father didn't look at me as I peeled off my coat and flopped down in the old green easy-chair.

"Decided to come home after all, did you?" he said after a minute. There was no sign of Joe in his long, square face, which had been jammed in an expression of disgust since my sister Rose had had her first baby three months after her wedding. On the television, a woman in a fancy restaurant threw a drink in a man's face. "Thought you were going to Connecticut with your rich-bitch girlfriend."

I shrugged.

"Come back to see him, didn't you?" He reached for one of the beer cans on the end table, giving it a little shake to make sure there was something in it. "What'ud he do, call you?"

"I got a postcard." On TV the drink-throwing woman was now a corpse. A detective was frowning down at her. Women who threw drinks always ended up as corpses; if she'd watched enough TV, she'd have known that.

"A postcard. Some big deal. A postcard from a broken-down junkie. We're only your parents and we practically have to get down on our knees and beg you to come home."

I took a deep breath. "Glad to see you, too. Home sweet home."

"You watch that smart mouth on you. You coulda phoned. I'd a picked you up at the bus station. It ain't like it used to be around here." My father finished the can and parked it with the other empties. "There's a new element coming in. You don't know them and they don't know you and they don't care whose sister you are. Girl on the next block, lived here all her life — raped. On the street and it wasn't hardly dark out."

"Who was it?"

"How the hell should I know, goddamuit? What am I, the Census Bureau? I don't keep track of every urchin around here."

"Then how do you know she lived here all her life?"

My father was about to bellow at me when my mother appeared in the doorway to the kitchen. "China. Come in here. I'll fix you

something to eat."

"I'm not hungry."

Her face didn't change expression. "We got salami and Swiss cheese. I'll make you a sandwich."

Why not. She could make me a sandwich, I wouldn't eat it, and we could keep the enmity level up where it belonged. I heaved myself up out of the chair and went into the kitchen.

"*Did* you come home on his account?" my mother asked as I sat down at the kitchen table.

"I got a postcard from him."

"Did you." She kept her back to me while she worked at the counter. Always a soft doughy woman, my mother seemed softer and doughier than ever, as though a release had been sprung somewhere inside her, loosening everything. After a bit, she turned around holding a plate with a sandwich on it. Motherhood magic, culinary prestidigitation with ordinary salami, Swiss cheese and white bread. Behold, the family life. Too many *Leave It To Beaver* reruns. She set the plate down in front of me.

"I did it," she said. "I threw him out."

"I figured."

She poured me a cup of coffee. "First I broke all his needles and threw them in the trash."

"Good, Ma. You know the police sometimes go through the trash where junkies are known to live?"

"So what are they going to do, bust me and your father? Joe doesn't

live here any more. I wouldn't stand for him using this place as a shooting gallery. He stole. Took money out of my purse, took things and sold them. Like we don't work hard enough for anything that we can just let a junkie steal from us."

I didn't say anything. It would have been the same if he'd been staying with me. "I know, Ma."

"So?" She was gripping the back of a chair as though she didn't know whether she wanted to throw it or pull it out and sit down.

"So what," I said.

"So what do you want with him?"

"He asked for me, Ma."

"Oh, he asked for you. Great. What are you going to do, take him to live with you in your dorm room? Won't that be cozy."

I had an absurd picture of it. He'd have had a field day with all of Marlene's small valuables. "Where's Aurelia?"

"How should I know? We're on notice here — she does what she wants. I asked you to come home and talk to her. You wouldn't even answer my letters."

"What do you think I can do about her? I'm not her mother."

She gave me a dirty look. "Eat your sandwich."

I forced a bite and shoved the plate away. "I'm just not hungry."

"Suit yourself. You should have told me if you wanted something else."

"I didn't want something else. I didn't want anything." I helped myself to a cigarette. My mother's eyebrows went up but she said

nothing. "When Aurelia comes home, I'll talk to her, okay?"

"*If* she comes home. Sometimes she doesn't. I don't know where she stays. I don't know if she even bothers to go to school sometimes."

I tapped ashes into the ashtray. "*I* was never able to get away with anything like that."

The look she gave me was unidentifiable. Her eyelids lowered, one corner of her mouth pulling down. For a few moments I saw her as a stranger, some woman I'd never seen before who was waiting for me to figure something out but who was pretty sure I was too stupid to do it.

"Okay, *if* she comes home, I'll talk to her."

"Don't do me any favours. Anyway, you'll probably be out looking for *him*."

"I've always been closer to him than anyone else in the family was."

My mother made a disgusted noise. "Isn't that sweet?"

"He's still a human being, Ma. And he's still my brother."

"Don't lecture to *me* about family, you. What do you think I am, the custodian here? Maybe when you go back to college, you'd like to take Joe and Aurelia with you. Maybe you'd do better at making her come home at night and keeping him off the heroin. Go ahead.

You're welcome to do your best."

"I'm not their mother or father."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." My mother took a cigarette from the pack on the table and lit it. "They're still human beings, still your brother and sister. So what does that make me?"

I put my own cigarette out, picked my bag up in the living-room and went to the bedroom I shared with Aurelia. She had started to spread out a little in it, though the division between her side and my side was still fairly evident. Mainly because she obviously wasn't spending a lot of time here.

For a long time, I sat on my bed fully clothed, just staring out the window. The street below was empty and dark and there was nothing to look at. I kept looking at it until I heard my parents go to bed. A little later, when I thought they were asleep, I opened the window a crack and rolled a joint from the stuff in the bottom drawer of my bureau. Most of the lid was still there, which meant Aurelia hadn't found it. I'd never liked grass that much after the novelty wore off, but I wanted something to blot out the bad taste the evening had left in my brain.

A whole joint to myself was a lot more than I was used to and the buzz was thick and debilitating. The smoke coiled into unreadable symbols and patterns before it was sucked out the window into the cold and dark. I thought of ragged ghosts fleeing a house like rats jumping off a sinking ship. It was the kind of dopey thought that occupies your mind for hours when you're stoned, which was fine with me. I didn't want to have to think about anything that mattered.

Eventually, I became aware that I was cold. When I could move, I reached over to shut the window and something down on the street caught my eye. It was too much in the shadows close to the building to see very well if it was even there at all. Hasher's delirium, or in this case Grasser's delirium. I tried to watch it anyway. There was a certain strength of definition and independence from the general

fuzziness of my stoned eyesight, something that suggested there was more to it than the dope in my brain. Whatever it was — a dope exaggeration of a cat or a dog or a big rat — I didn't like it.

Unbidden, my father's words about a new element moving in slid into my head. Something about the thing made me think of a reptile, stunted evolution or evolution reversed, and a sort of evil that might have lain thickly in pools of decay millions of years ago, pre-dating warmblooded life. Which was ridiculous, I thought, because human beings brought the distinction between good and evil into the world. Good and evil, and stoned and not stoned. I was stoned. I went to bed.

But remember, said my still-buzzing mind as I was drifting into stupor-sleep, in order to make distinctions between any two things like good and evil, they first have to exist, don't they.

This is what happens when would-be intellectuals get stoned, I thought and passed out.

The sound of my father leaving for work woke me. I lay listening to my mother in the kitchen, waiting for the sound of bacon and eggs frying and her summons to get up and have a good breakfast.

Instead, I heard water running briefly in the sink and then her footsteps going back to the bedroom and the door closing. That was new: my mother going back to bed after my father went to work in spite of the fact that the college kid was home. I hadn't particularly wanted to talk to her anyway, especially if it were just going to be a continuation of the previous night but it still made me feel funny.

I washed and dressed, taking my time, but my mother never re-

emerged. Apparently she was just not going to be part of my day. I left the house far earlier than I'd intended to, figuring I'd go find something to do with myself until it was time to meet Farmer and the others.

In the front vestibule of the apartment building, I nearly collided with my sister Rose, who seemed about ready to have her baby at any moment. She had dyed her hair blonde again, a cornsilk yellow colour already brassing at the ends and showing dark roots.

"What are you doing home?" she asked, putting her hands protectively over her belly, protruding so much she couldn't button her coat.

"Vacation," I said. "How are you?"

"How am I ever? Pregnant."

"There *is* such a thing as birth control."

"Yeah, and there is such a thing as it not working. So?"

"Well. This is number five, isn't it?"

"I didn't *know* you were keeping score." She tried pulling her coat around her front but it wouldn't go. "It's cold down here. I'm going up to Ma."

"She went back to bed."

"She'll get up for me."

"Should you be climbing all those stairs in your condition?"

Rose lifted her plucked-to-nothing eyebrows. "You wanna carry me?" She pushed past me and slowly started up the first-flight of steps.

"Come on, Rose," I called after her, "what'll happen if your bag of waters breaks or something while you're on the stairs?"

She turned to look at me from seven steps up. "I'll scream, what do you think I'll do?" She resumed her climb.

"Well, do you want me to walk up with you?" I asked, starting after her. She just waved a hand at me and kept going. Annoyed and amused, I waited until she had made the first landing and begun the next flight, wondering if I shouldn't run up after her anyway or at least stay there until I heard my mother let her in. Then I decided Rose probably knew what she was doing, in a half-assed way. My theory was that she had been born pregnant and waited sixteen years until she found someone to act as father. She hadn't been much smaller than she was now when she and Roger had got married, much to my parents' dismay. It hadn't bothered Rose in the least.

The sun was shining brightly but there was no warmth to it. The snow lining the kerb was dirtier than ever, pitted and brittle. Here and there on the sidewalk old patches of ice clung to the pavement like frozen jellyfish left after a receding tide. It wasn't even 10:30 but I went over to Streep's Lunch, in case anyone put in an early appearance. That wasn't very likely but there wasn't much else to do.

Streep had the place to himself except for a couple of old people sitting near the windows. I took a seat at the counter and ordered breakfast to make up for the night before. My atonement didn't exactly impress him but he surprised me by actually speaking to me as he poured my coffee. "You home on vacation?"

"That's right," I said, feeling a little wary as I added cream from an aluminium pitcher.

"You like college?"

"It would be heaven if it weren't for the classes."

Streep's rubbery mouth twitched, shaking his jowls. "I thought that was what you went for, to go to classes and get smart."

I shrugged.

"Maybe you think you're already smart."

"Some people would say so." I smiled, thinking he should have asked my father.

"You think it's smart to keep coming around here and hanging out with junkies?"

I blinked at him. "I didn't know you cared."

"Just askin' a question."

"You haven't seen my brother Joe lately, have you?"

Streep made a fast little noise that was less than a laugh and walked away. Someone had left a newspaper on one of the stools to my right. I picked it up and read it over breakfast just for something to do. An hour passed, with Streep coming back every so often to refill my cup without any more conversation. I bought a pack of cigarettes from the machine just to have something else to do and noticed one of the old people had gone to sleep before finishing breakfast. She was very old, with frizzy grey hair and a sagging hawk nose. Her mouth had dropped open to show a few long, stained teeth. I had a half-baked idea of waking her when she gave an enormous snore. Streep didn't even look at her. What the hell, her hash browns were probably stone cold anyway. I went back to my

newspaper.

When the clock over the grill said 12:10, I left some money on the counter and went outside. I should have known they'd be late, I thought. I'd probably have to stand around until close to dark, when they'd finally remember they were supposed to meet me here and not show, figuring I'd split.

A horn honked several times. George poked his head out the driver's side window of a car parked across the street. I hurried over as the back door swung open.

"Christ, we been waiting for you," Farmer said irritably as I climbed in. "You been in there the whole time?"

"I thought you were meeting Priscilla here."

"Change of venue, you should pardon the expression," Farmer said.

"Streep won't give you a cup of water to go." He was in the front with George. Stacey and the kid were in the back with me. The kid didn't look so good today. He had dark circles under his eyes and wherever he'd spent the night hadn't had a washroom.

"Why aren't you in school?" I asked him.

"Screw it, what's it to you?" he said flippantly.

"Haven't been home yet, have you?"

"Chrissakes, what are you, his probation officer?" said Farmer.

"Let's go, she's waiting."

The car pulled away from the kerb with a jerk. George swore as he eased it into the light noontime traffic. "I ain't used to automatics," he complained to no one.

Farmer was rummaging in the glove compartment. "Hey, there's no works in here. You got any?"

"I got them, don't worry. Just wait till we pick up Priscilla, okay?"

"Just tell me where they are."

"Don't sweat it, I told you I got them."

"I just want to know where."

"Up my ass, all right? Now let me drive."

"I'll give you up your ass," Farmer said darkly.

Stacey tapped him on the back of the head. "Come on, take it easy, Farmer. Everybody's gonna get what they need from Priscilla."

"Does Priscilla know where Joe is?" I asked.

"Priscilla knows everything," said Stacey, believing it.

Priscilla herself was standing on the sidewalk in front of a beauty parlour, holding a big Styrofoam cup. She barely waited for the car to stop before she yanked the door open and got into the front seat next to Farmer.

"You got works?" he asked as she handed him the cup. "This asshole won't tell me if he's got any."

"In a minute, Farmer. I have to say hello to China." She knelt on the front seat and held her arms out to me. Obediently, I leaned forward over the kid so she could hug me. She was as bizarre-looking as ever, with her pale pancake make-up, frosted pink lipstick, heavily outlined eyes, and flat black hair. The junkie version of Elizabeth Taylor. She was a strange little girl in a puffy woman's body and she ran hot and cold with me, sometimes playing my older sister,

then snubbing me outright, depending on Joe. They'd been on and off for as long as he'd been shooting, with her as the pursuer unless Joe knew for sure that she had a good connection.

Today she surprised me by kissing me lightly on the lips. It was like being kissed by a crayon. "How's our college kid?" she asked tenderly.

"Fine, Priscilla. Have you—"

"I haven't seen you since the fall," she went on, gripping the back of the seat as George pulled into the street again. "How do you like school? Are you doing real well?"

Farmer pulled her around. "This is very sweet, old home week and all, but do you have anything?"

"No, Farmer, I always stand around on the street with a cup of water. Don't spill it."

"I've got a spoon," said the kid, holding one up. Stacey took it from him.

"Me first?" she asked hopefully.

Priscilla turned around and stared down her nose at her, junkie aristocracy surveying the rabble. "I understand I'm not the only one in this car with works?"

George was patting himself down awkwardly as he drove, muttering, "Shit, shit, shit."

"Asshole," said Farmer. "I knew you didn't have any."

"I *had* some, but I don't know where they are now."

"Try looking up your ass. Priscilla?"

Priscilla let out a noisy sigh. "I'm not going to do this any more. Some day we're all going to get hep and die."

"Well, *I'm* clean," the kid announced proudly.

"Keep borrowing works, you'll get a nice case of hepatitis," I said.

"Joe got the clap once, using someone else's."

"Bullshit."

"Tell him whose spike it was, Stacey," I said, feeling mean. Stacey flushed.

"And you want to go first?" Priscilla said. "No way."

"That was last year. I'm cured now, honest. I don't even have a cold." She glared at me. "Please, Priscilla. Please."

Priscilla sighed again and passed her a small square of foil and a plastic syringe. "You give me anything and I'll fucking kill you, I swear."

"Here, hold this." Stacey dumped everything in the kid's lap and took the water from Farmer. "Who's got a belt?"

Somehow, everyone looked at everyone else and ended up looking at me.

"Shit," I said and slipped it off. Stacey reached for it and I held it back. "Somebody tell me where Joe is or I'll throw this out the window right now."

"China, don't be like that. You're holding things up," said Priscilla chidingly, as though I were a bratty younger sister.

"I just want to know where Joe is."

"Just let us fix first, okay? Now give Stacey your belt."

Stacey snatched the belt away from me before I could say anything else and shoved her shirt and sweater sleeves high up on her arm. "Wrap it on me," she said to the kid. Her voice was getting shaky. The kid got the belt around her upper arm and pulled it snug. He had to pour a little water into the bowl of the spoon for her, too, and shake the heroin out of the foil. Someone had a ragged piece of something that had to pass for cheesecloth. Stacey fidgeted with it while the kid held a match under the spoon. When the mix in the bowl started to bubble, Stacey laid the cloth over the surface and drew some solution into the syringe. Her hands were very steady now. She held the syringe up and flicked it with her finger.

"Will you hurry it up?" Farmer snapped. "There's other people besides you."

"Keep your shirt on, I'm trying to lose some bubbles. Help me," Stacey said. "Tighten that belt."

The kid pulled the belt tighter for her as she straightened her arm. She felt in the fold of her elbow with her pinky. "There he is. Old Faithful. He shoulda collapsed long ago but he just keeps on truckin'. I heard about this guy, you know? Who shot an air bubble and he saw it in his vein just as he was nodding out, you know?" She probed with the needle, drew back the plunger and found blood. "That poor guy just kept stroking it down and stroking it down and would you believe—" her eyelids fluttered. I reached over the kid to loosen the belt on her arm. "He actually got rid of it. He's still shooting." She started to say something else and passed out.

"Jesus, Priscilla." I took the needle out of Stacey's arm. "What kind of stuff have you got?"

"Only the best. Joe's new connection. You next?" she asked the kid.

"He's not an addict yet," I said. "He can pass this time."

"Who asked you?" said the kid. "You're not my fucking mother."

"You have to mainline for two weeks straight to get a habit," I said.

"Take the day off."

But he already had the belt around his arm. "No. Give me the needle."

I plunged the syringe into the cup he was holding. "You have to clean it first, jerk-off." I cranked down the window and squirted a thin stream of water into the air. "If you're going to do this anyway, you might as well do it right."

Suddenly he looked unsure of himself. "I never shot myself up before. Stacey always did me."

I looked at her, sprawled out on his other side. "She's a big help, that girl. Looks like you're on your own. I don't give injections."

But I flicked the bubbles out of the syringe for him. It was better than watching him shoot an air bubble. He had veins like power cables.

Priscilla went next. I barely had time to clean the needle and spoon for her. Farmer fixed after her. The spoon was looking bad. I was scrubbing the mess out of it with a corner of my shirt when I noticed it was real silver. The kid's spoon. Probably stolen out of his mother's service for eight. Or maybe it was the one they'd found lodged in his mouth when he'd been born. I looked at him slumped next to Stacey, eyes half-closed, too ecstatic to smile. Was this part of the new element moving in that my father had mentioned, a

pampered high-school kid?

"Priscilla, are you awake?" I asked, squirting water from the needle out the window while Farmer cooked his load.

"Maim," she said, lazily.

"Do you really know where Joe is?"

She didn't answer. I dipped the needle into the water one last time and squirted a stream out the window again. It arched gracefully into the air and splattered against the passenger side window of the police car that had pulled up even with us. I froze, still holding the needle up in plain sight. Farmer was telling me to hand him the fucking spike but his voice seemed to be coming through miles of cotton batting. I was back in the buzz of the night before, the world doing a slow-motion underwater ballet of the macabre while I watched my future dribble down the window along with the water. The cop at the wheel turned his head for a year before his eyes met mine. Riding all alone, must be budget-cutting time, my mind babbled. His face was flat and I could see through the dirty glass that his skin was rough and leathery. His tongue flicked out and ran over his lips as we stared at each other. He blinked once, in a funny way, as though the lower lids of his colourless eyes had risen to meet the upper ones. A kind of recognition passed between us. Then he turned away and the police car accelerated, passing us.

"Did you see that?" I gave the needle to Farmer, who was calling me nine kinds of bastard.

"Nope," George said grimly. "And he didn't see us, neither."

I tried to laugh, as though I were in on the joke. "Oh, man. I thought

for sure we were all busted."

"Times are changing."

"Don't tell me the junkies are pooling their money to buy off the cops."

Priscilla came to and sighed happily. "Somebody is. We got all the conveniences. Good dope, bad cops. Things ain't so bad around here these days."

The kid was pulling himself up on me. I sat him up without thinking about it. "Priscilla? Do you know where Joe is? Priscilla?"

"Joe? Oh, yeah. He's at my place."

"I thought he was going around with his connection."

"He's at my place. Or he was."

George pulled the car over again as Farmer woozily began cooking his shot for him. "Let me fix and I'll drive you over there, okay?" he said, smiling thinly over his shoulder at me.

The kid threw himself over my lap and fumbled the car door open.

"Wanna go for a walk," he mumbled, crawling over my legs and hauling himself upright on the door. He stood swaying and tried a few tentative steps. "Can't make it. Too loaded." I caught him and pulled him back in, shoving him over next to Stacey. He smiled at me. "You're a real nice girl, you know that? You're a real nice girl."

"Shit!" George slammed his hand against the steering wheel. "It broke, the fucking needle broke!"

"Did you fix?" asked Farmer.

"Yeah, just in time. Sorry, Priscilla." George turned to look at her

and nearly fell across Farmer. "I'll find mine and give it to you. Never been used, I swear."

Priscilla made a disgusted noise.

"Hey, if everybody's happy, let's go over to Priscilla's place now," I said.

George wagged his head. "Not yet. Can't get that far, stuff was too strong. I gotta let it wear off some first. Where are we?" He opened his door and nearly fell out. "Hey, we're back near Streep's. Go there for a while, okay?" No one answered. "Okay? Go to Streep's, get some coffee, listen to some music. Okay?" He nudged Farmer. "Okay?"

"Shit." I got out, hauled the kid out after me and left him leaning on the door while I dragged Stacey out. She woke up enough to smile at me. Farmer and Priscilla found their way around the car, stumbling over each other. I looked around. A few cars passed, no one paying any attention. Here we are in scenic Junk City in the Land of Nod, where five loaded hop-heads can attract no interest. What's wrong with this picture?

George reeled past me and I grabbed him, patting his pants pockets. "What?" he said dreamily.

"Let me borrow your car."

"It's not my car. It's—" His voice trailed off as his head drooped.

"That's okay," I said, shaking him, "just give me the keys." I dug them out of his right pants pocket, giving him a thrill he was too far gone to appreciate. George wasn't wearing any underwear.

"Priscilla."

She had managed to go nearly half a block unassisted. At the sound of her name, she swivelled around, hugging herself against a cold she probably wasn't really feeling.

"Is Joe really at your place?"

She shrugged elaborately. "Hurry, you might catch him." Farmer went by and yanked her along with him. I watched them all weaving and staggering away from me, a ragged little group minus one, who was still leaning against the car.

"My name's Tad," he said. Probably short for tadpole, I thought.

"Take me with you."

I went to call out to Farmer and the rest of them but they had already turned the corner. I was stuck with their new friend unless I chose to leave him in some doorway. He was grinning at me as he swayed from side to side. The coat was dirty now but it was still pretty nice. His gloves looked like kidskin and the boots were brand-new. If I left him, I'd come back and find him up on blocks, nude. I shoved him into the back seat.

"Lie down, pass out, and don't give me any trouble."

"You're a real nice girl," he mumbled.

"Yeah, we could go to the prom together in a couple of years."

The front seat was too far back for me and wouldn't move up. I perched on the edge of the broken-down cushion and just managed to reach the pedals. I got the car started but pulling out was the tricky part. I'd never learned to drive. The car itself wasn't in terrific running condition — it wanted either to stall or race. I eased it down the street in half a dozen jerks that pushed me against the steering

wheel and sent the kid in back off the seat and on to the floor. He didn't complain.

Priscilla had an apartment in one of the tenements near the railroad yard. The buildings looked abandoned at first glance; at second glance, they still looked abandoned. I steered the car off the road into an unpaved area that served as a parking lot and pulled up in front of the building nearest to the tracks. In the back, my companion pulled himself up on the seat, rubbing his eyes. "Where are we?"

"Wait here," I said, getting out of the car.

He shook his head emphatically. "No, I was here last night. This is Priscilla's. It ain't safe. I should go with you." He stumbled out of the car and leaned against it, trying to look sober. "I'm okay now. I'm just high."

"I'm not going to wait for you." I headed towards the building with him staggering after me. The heroin in his system had stabilized somewhat and he fell only three times. I kept going.

He gave up on the first flight. I left him hanging on the railing muttering to himself while I trotted up to Priscilla's place on the second floor. The door was unlocked, I knew — the lock had been broken ages ago and Priscilla wasn't about to spend good junk money on getting it fixed — but the sagging screen door was latched. I found a torn place in the screen and reached in to unhook it.

"Joe?" I called, stepping into the filthy kitchen. An odour of something long dead hit me square in the face, making me gag.

"Joe?" I tiptoed across the room. On the sink was a package of hamburger Priscilla had probably left out to thaw then forgotten about, three weeks before, it seemed like. I wondered how she could stand it and then remembered how she liked to brag that coke had destroyed her nose. The rest of them wouldn't care as long as they could get fixed. My stomach leaped and I heaved on the floor. It was just a bit of bile in spite of the breakfast I'd eaten but I couldn't take any more and headed for the porch.

"Whaddaya want?"

I whirled, holding my hand over my mouth and nose as my gag reflex went into action again. A large black man wearing only a pair of pyjama bottoms was standing in the doorway to the bedroom. We stared at each other curiously.

"Whaddaya want?" he asked me again.

"I'm looking for Joe," I said from behind my hand.

"I'm Joe." He scratched his face and I saw a thin line of blood trickling from the corner of his mouth.

"Wrong Joe," I said, cursing Priscilla. She knew goddamm well, the con artist. What did she think, that I'd forget about finding Joe and curl up with this guy instead? Yeah, that was Priscilla all over. A Joe for a Joe, fair deal. "The Joe I'm looking for is my brother."

"I'm a brother."

"Yeah. You're bleeding."

He touched his mouth and looked dully at his fingers. "I'm blood."

I nodded. "Well, if you see a white guy named Joe, he's *my* brother. Tell him China was looking for him."

"China."

"Right. China."

"China's something real fragile. Could break." His expression altered slightly and that same kind of recognition that had passed between me and the cop in the patrol car seemed to pass between us now in Priscilla's stinking kitchen.

I glanced at the rotting hamburger on the counter and suddenly it didn't look like rotting meat any more than the man standing in the doorway of Priscilla's bedroom looked like another junkie, or even a human being. He tilted his head and studied me, his eyes narrowing, and it all seemed to be going in slow motion, that underwater feeling again.

"If you ain't in some kinda big hurry, why don't you hang around," he said. "Here all by myself. Not too interesting, nobody to rap with. Bet you got a lot of stuff you could rap about."

Yeah, he was probably craving to find out if I'd read any good books lately. I opened my mouth to say something and the stink hit me again in the back of the throat.

"Whaddaya say, you stick around here for a while. I don't bite. 'Less I'm invited to."

I wanted to ask him what he'd bitten just recently. He touched his lip as though he'd been reading my mind and shrugged. I took a step back. He didn't seem awfully junked up any more and it occurred to me that it was strange that he wasn't with Priscilla instead of here, all by himself.

Maybe, I thought suddenly, he was waiting for someone. Maybe Joe

was supposed to be here after all, maybe he was supposed to come here for some reason and I'd just arrived ahead of him.

I swallowed against the stink, almost choked again, and said, "Hey, did Priscilla tell you she had a friend coming by, a guy named Joe, or just a guy maybe? I mean, have you been waiting for someone?"

"Just you, babe."

I'd heard that line once or twice but it never sounded so true as it did just then. The kid's words suddenly came back to me. *This is Priscilla's. I was here last night.* Farmer must have run right over after I'd seen him, to tell her I was looking for Joe. So she decided to send me on a trip to nowhere, with Farmer and the rest of them in on it, playing out the little charade of meeting her today so I could ask her about Joe and she could run this ramadoola on me. But why? What was the point?

"No, man," I said, taking another step back. "Not me."

"You sure about that?" The voice was smooth enough to slip on, like glare ice. Ice. It was chilly in the apartment, but he didn't seem to feel it. "Must be something I can... help you with."

Outside there was the sound of a train approaching in the distance. In a few moments, you wouldn't be able to hear anything for the roar of the train passing.

I turned and fled out to the porch. The dead-meat smell seemed to follow me as I galloped back down the stairs and woke the kid still hanging in the banister. "Let's go, let's get out of here."

The train was thundering past as I shoved him back into the car and pulled out.

"You find Joe?" he shouted as we bounced across the parking lot.

"Yeah, I found him. I found the wrong fucking Joe."

The kid giggled a little. "There's lots of guys named Joe."

"Thanks for the information, I'll keep it in mind." I steered the car on to the street again, unsure of what to do next. Maybe just cruise around, stopping random junkies and asking them if they'd seen Joe, or look for the white Caddy or whatever it was. A white luxury car would stand out, especially if a pretty blonde woman were driving it.

The junkies were starting to come out in force now, appearing on the sidewalks and street corners. A few of them waved at the car and then looked confused when they saw me at the wheel. It seemed to me there were more new faces among the familiar ones, people I didn't even know by sight. But that would figure, I thought; had I really expected the junkie population to go into some kind of stasis while I was away at college? Every junkie's got a friend and eventually the friend's got a habit. Like the jailbait in the back seat. I glanced in the rear-view mirror at him. He was sitting up with his head thrown back, almost conscious. If I were going to find Joe or at least his lady friend, I'd have to dump the kid.

"Wake up" I said, making a right turn on to the street that would take me past Foster Circle and down to Streep's. "I'm going to leave you off at the restaurant with everyone else. Can you handle that?"

He struggled forward and leaned over the front seat. "But we ain't found Joe yet."

" 'Haven't found Joe yet.' What's the matter, do you just nod out in English class?"

He giggled. "Yeah. Don't everyone?"

"Maybe. I can't be hauling your ass all over with me. There's no end-of-class bell around here. You're on your own." I took another look at him as he hung over the seat, grinning at me like God's own fool.

"You don't know that, do you?"

"Know what?" He ruffled my hair clumsily.

"Quit that. You don't know that you're on your own."

"Shit, I got *lots* of friends."

"You've got junkies is what you've got. Don't confuse them with friends."

"Yeah?" He ruffled my hair again and I slapped his hand away. "So why are you so hot to find Joe?"

"Joe isn't my friend, he's my brother."

"Jeez, no kidding? I thought you were like his old lady or something."

How quickly they forget, junkies. I was about to answer him when I saw it, gleaming like fresh snow in the afternoon sunlight, impossibly clean, illegally parked right at the kerb at Foster Circle. George had been right — it was a Caddy after all. I looked for a place to pull over and found one in front of a fire hydrant.

"Wait here," I said, killing the engine. "If I'm not back in ten minutes, you're free to go."

"Uh-uh," the kid said, falling back and fumbling for the door handle. "I'm coming with you."

"Fuck off." I jumped out of the car and darted across two lanes of

oncoming traffic, hoping the kid would pass out again before he solved the mystery of the door handle. The Caddy was unoccupied; I stepped over the low thorny bushes the ex-mayor had chosen for their red summer blooms and look around wildly.

At the time, it didn't seem strange that I almost didn't see her. She was sitting on a bench fifty feet away looking as immaculate as her car in a thick brown coat and spike-heeled boots. Her pale blonde hair curved over her scarf in a simple, classy pageboy, like a fashion model. More like an ex-fashion model, from the careful, composed way she was sitting with her ankles crossed and her tidy purse resting on her knees, except the guy on the bench next to her wasn't material for the Brut ad campaign. It was Farmer. He still looked pretty bleary but he raised one arm and pointed at me. She turned to look and her elegantly made-up face broke into that sort of cheery smile some stewardesses reserve for men who drink heavily in first class.

She beckoned with a gloved hand and I went over to them.

"Hello," she said in a warm contralto. "We've been waiting for you."

"Oh, yeah?" I said casually. "Seems like there's always someone waiting for me these days. Right, Farmer?" He was too busy staring at the woman to answer. "I thought you didn't know how to find her."

"I don't," Farmer said and smiled moonily at the woman, which pissed me off. "She found me. Kind of."

"At *Streep's*?" I didn't look right at her but I could see she was following the exchange with that same cheery smile, completely

unoffended that we were talking about her in the third person.

"Nah. After you left us off, I left everybody at Streep's and came down here, figuring maybe I could find somebody who'd get in touch with Joe for you."

"Sure. Except Priscilla told me Joe was at her place. Only he wasn't. What about that, Farmer? You wanna talk about that a little? Like how you were there last night?"

Farmer could have cared less, though it was hard to see how. "Yeah, we was there. She wouldn't let us in, said she'd meet us today like we planned." He shrugged. "Anyway, I came down here and there was her car going down the street, so I flagged her down and told her you were looking for Joe. So then we came here. I figured you'd look here sooner or later because this was there I told you I saw her and Joe. And, you know, Streep's, shit, it's not a good place."

Sure wasn't, especially if you thought you could make your own connection and not have to let the rest of your junkie pals in on it directly. "So you decided to sit out in the cold instead." I blew out a short, disgusted breath. "I'd have gone back to Streep's eventually."

"Well, if it got too cold, we was gonna get in the car." Farmer looked uncomfortable. "Hey, what are you bitching at me for? I found her, didn't I?"

I turned to the woman. "Where's Joe?"

Her eyes were deep blue, almost navy. "He's at my place. I understand you're his sister, China?" She tilted her head like game-show women do when they're showing you the year's supply of Turtle Wax behind the door number three. "I had no idea Joe had a

sister in college. But I see the resemblance, you have the same eyes, the same mouth. You're very close to Joe?"

"I'd like to see him."

She spread her hands. "Then we'll go see him. All of us." She smiled past me and I turned around. The kid was standing several feet behind me, still doped up and a little unsteady but looking eager and interested in that way junkies have when they smell a possibility of more heroin. Fuck the two weeks; he'd been a junkie all his life, just like Joe.

I turned back to the woman, intending to tell her the kid was only fifteen and surely she didn't want that kind of trouble but she was already on her feet, helping Farmer up, her expensive gloves shining incongruously against his worn, dirty denim jacket.

But then again, she didn't have to touch him with her bare hands.

She made no objection when I got into the front seat with her and jerked my thumb over my shoulder instead of moving over so Farmer could get in next to me. He piled into the back with the kid and we drove off just as a meter maid pulled up next to George's car. I looked over my shoulder at the Cushman.

"Looks like we're leaving just in time," I said.

"They never ticket my car." She pushed a Grateful Dead eight-track into the tape deck and adjusted the volume on the rear speakers.

"That's funny," I said, "you don't seem like the Grateful Dead type. I'd have thought you were more of a Sinatra fan. Or maybe Tony Bennett."

"Actually, my own taste runs to chamber music," she said smoothly.

"But it has a very limited appeal with most of our clients. The Grateful Dead have a certain rough charm, especially in their ballads, though I will never have the appreciation for them that so many young people do. I understand they're quite popular among college students."

"Yeah, St Stephen with a rose," I said. "Have another hit and all that. Except that's Quicksilver Messenger Service."

"I have one of their tapes, too, if you'd prefer to hear that instead."

"No, the Dead will do."

She almost looked at me. Then Farmer called out, "This is *such* a great *car!*" and she turned up the volume slightly.

"They can't hear us," she said.

"They sure can't."

Her face should have been tired from smiling so much but she was a true professional. Don't try this at home. Suddenly I wished I hadn't. My father was right: cocky snot-nosed college know-it-all. I hadn't had the first idea of what I'd got into here with this white Cadillac and this ex-fashion model who referred to junkies as clients but I was beginning to get a clue. We were heading for the toll bridge over the river. The thing to do was jump out as soon as she stopped, jump out and run like hell and hope that would be fast enough.

There was soft, metallic click. Power locks.

"Such a bad area," she said. "Must always keep the doors secure when you drive through."

And then, of course, she blinked. Even with her in profile, I could see her lower eyelid rise to meet the upper one.

She used the exact change lane, barely slowing as she lowered the window and reached towards the basket. For my benefit only, I guessed: her hand was empty.

She took us to a warehouse just on the other side of the river, one of several in an industrial cluster. Some seemed to be abandoned, some not. It wasn't quite evening yet but the place was shadowy. Still, I was willing to make a run for it as soon as we stopped and fuck whatever was in the shadows, I'd take my chances that I'd be able to get away, maybe come back with the cops. After I'd given them a blink test. But she had some arrangement; no stops. While the Dead kept on trucking, she drove us right up a ramp to a garage door, which automatically rumbled upward. We drove on to a platform that had chicken-wire fencing on either side. Two bright lamps hanging on the chicken wire went on. After a moment, there was a jerk and the platform began to lift slowly. Really some arrangement.

"Such a bad area," she said. "You take your life in your hands if you get out of the car."

Yeah, I thought, I just bet you did.

After a long minute, the elevator thumped to a stop and the doors in front of us slid open. We were looking into a huge, elegantly furnished living-room. *House and Garden* conquers the universe.

"This is it," she said gaily, killing the engine and the Dead.

"Everybody out. Careful when you open the door, don't scratch the paint. Such a pain getting it touched up."

I waited for her to release the locks and then I banged my door loudly against the chicken wire. What the hell, I figured; I'd had it anyway. Only a cocky snot-nosed college know-it-all would think like that.

But she didn't say anything to me about it, or even give me a look. She led the way into the living-room and gestured at the long beige sofa facing the elevator doors, which slid closed just as Farmer and the kid staggered across the threshold.

"Make yourselves, comfortable," she said. "Plenty of refreshments on the table."

"Oh, man," said Farmer, plumping down on the couch. "Can we play some more music, maybe some more Dead?"

"Patience, Farmer," she said as she took off her coat and laid it on one of the stools in front of a large mahogany wet bar. It had a mirror behind it and, above that, an old-fashioned picture of a plump woman in bloomers and corset lounging on her side eating chocolates from a box. It was like a stage set. She watched me staring at it.

"Drink?" she said. "I didn't think people your age partook in that very much nowadays but we have a complete stock for those who can appreciate vats and vintages and whatnot."

"I'll take a shot of twenty-year-old Scotch right after you show me where Joe is."

The woman chuckled indulgently. "Wouldn't you prefer a nice cognac?"

"Whatever you think is best," I said.

"I'll be right back." She didn't move her hips much when she walked, but in that cream-coloured cashmere dress she didn't have to. This was real refinement, real class and taste. Smiling at me over her shoulder one more time, she slipped through a heavy wooden door at the far end of the room next to an enormous antique secretary.

I looked *at* Farmer and the kid, who were collapsed on the sofa like junkie versions of Raggedy Andy.

"Oh, *man*" said Farmer, "this is *such a great place!* I never been in such a *great place!*"

"Yeah," said the kid, "it's so far out."

There were three silver boxes on the coffee table in front of them. I went over and opened one; there were several syringes in it, all clean and new. The box next to it held teaspoons and the one next to that, white powder. That one was next to the table lighter. I picked it up. It was an elaborately carved silver dragon coiled around a rock or a monolith or something, its wings pulled in close to its scaly body. You flicked the wheel in the middle of its back and the flame came out of its mouth. All I needed was a can of aerosol deodorant and I'd have had a flamethrower. Maybe I'd have been able to get out with a flamethrower. I doubted it.

"Jeez, will you look at that!" said the kid, sitting up in delayed reaction to the boxes. "What a set-up!"

"This is such a *great place!*" Farmer said, picking up the box of heroin.

"Yeah, a real junkie heaven," I said. "It's been nice knowing you."

Farmer squinted up at me. "You going?"

"We're all going."

He sat back, still holding the box while the kid eyed him nervously.

"You go ahead. I mean, this isn't exactly your scene anyway. But I'm hanging in."

"You just don't get it, do you? You think Blondie is just going to let you wander back put across the river with all the horse you can carry?"

Farmer smiled. "Shit, maybe she wants me to move in. I think she likes me. I get that very definite feeling."

"Yeah, and the two of you could adopt Tadpole here, and Stacey and Priscilla and George can come over for Sunday roast."

The kid shot me a dirty look. Farmer shrugged. "Hey, somebody's got to be out there, takin' care of the distribution."

"And she throws out Joe to make room for you, right?" I said.

"Oh, yeah, Joe." Farmer tried to think. "Well, hell, this is a big place. There's room for three. More, even." He giggled again.

"*Farmer.* I don't think many people see this place and live."

He yawned widely, showing his coated tongue. "Hey, ain't we all lucky, then."

"No. We're not lucky."

Farmer stared at me for a long moment. Then he laughed. "Shit, You're crazy."

The door at the far end of the room opened again and the woman came out. "Here he is!" she announced cheerfully and pulled Joe

into the room.

My brother Joe, the original lost boy, the disposable man in an ankle-length bathrobe knotting loosely at the waist, showing his bony chest. The curly brown hair was cleaner than it had been the last time I'd seen him but duller and thinner, too. His eyes seemed to be sunk deep in the sockets and his skin looked dry and flaky. But he was steady on his bare feet as he came towards me.

"Joe," I said. "It's me, Chi—"

"I know, babe, I know." He didn't even change expression. "What the fuck?"

"I got your card."

"Shit. I told you, it was for the last time."

I blinked at him. "I came home because I thought..." I stopped, looking at the woman who was still smiling as she moved behind the bar and poured a little cognac into a glass.

"Well, go on," she said. "Tell him what you thought. And have your cognac. You should warm the bowl between your hands."

I shook my head slightly, looking down at the plush carpet. It was also beige. Not much foot traffic around here. "I thought you needed me to do something. Help you or something."

"I was saying goodbye, babe. That's all. I thought I should, you know, after everything you seen me through. I figured, what the hell, one person in the world who ever cared what happened to me, I'd say goodbye. Fucking parents don't care if they never see me again. Rose, Aurelia — like, forget it."

I looked up at him. He still hadn't changed expression. He might

have been telling me it was going to snow again this winter.

"Have your cognac," the woman said to me again. "You warm the bowl between your hands like this." She demonstrated and then held the glass out to me. When I didn't move to take it, she put it down on the bar. "Perhaps you'll feel like it later." She hurried over to the couch where Farmer and the kid were rifling the syringes and the spoons. Joe took a deep breath and let it out in a not-quite sigh.

"I can tell her to let you go," he said. "She'll probably do it."

"*Probably?*" I said.

He made a helpless, impotent gesture with one hand. "What the fuck did you come here for?"

"For you, asshole. What the fuck did *you* come here for?"

Bending over the coffee table, the woman looked back at us. "Are you going to answer that, Joe? Or shall I?"

Joe turned towards her slightly and gave a little shrug. "Will you let her go?"

That smile. "Probably."

Farmer was holding up a syringe. "Hey, I need some water. And a cooker. You got a spoon? And some cloth."

"Little early for your next fix, isn't it?" I said.

"Why wait?" He patted the box of junk cuddled in his lap.

The woman took the syringe from him and set it on the table. "You won't need any of that. We kept it around for those who have to be elsewhere — say, if you had an appointment to keep or if Joe were running an errand — but here we do it differently."

"Snort?" Farmer was disgusted. "Lady, I'm way past the snort stage." She gave a refined little laugh and moved around the coffee table to sit down beside him. "Snort. How revolting. There's no snorting here. Take off your jacket."

Farmer obeyed, tossing his jacket over the back of the couch. She pushed up his left shirtsleeve and studied his arm.

"Hey, China," Farmer said, watching the woman with junkie avidity, "gimme your belt."

"No belt," said the woman. "Sit back, relax. I'll take care of everything." She touched the inside of his elbow with two fingers and then ran her hand up to his neck. "Here is actually a lot better."

Farmer looked nervous. "In the neck? You sure you know what you're doing? Nobody does it in the neck."

"It's not an easy technique to master but it's far superior to your present methods. Not to mention faster and far more potent."

"Well, hey." Farmer laughed, still nervous. "More potent, sure, I'm for that."

"*Relax*" the woman said, pushing his head back against the couch.

"Joe's done it this way a lot of times, haven't you, Joe?"

I looked at his neck but I didn't see anything, not even dirt.

The woman loosened Farmer's collar and pushed his hair back, ignoring the fact that it was badly in need of washing. She stroked his skin with her fingertips, making a low, crooning noise, the kind of sound you'd use to calm a scared puppy. "There, now," she murmured, close to Farmer's neck. "There it is, there's our baby. All nice and strong. That's a good one."

Farmer moaned pleurably and reached for her but she caught his hand and held it firmly on his thigh.

"Don't squirm around now," she said. "This won't take long. Not very long."

She licked his neck.

I couldn't believe it. Farmer's dirty old neck. I'd have licked the sidewalk first. And *this* woman — I looked at Joe but he was watching the woman run her tongue up Farmer's neck and still no expression on him, as though he were watching a dull TV programme he'd already seen.

Farmer's eyelids were at half-mast. He gave a small laugh. "Tickles a little."

The woman pulled back and then blew on the spot gently.

"There now. We're almost ready." She took the box of heroin from his lap.

I didn't want to see this. I looked at Joe again. He shook his head slightly, keeping his gaze on the woman. She smiled at me, scooped up a small amount of heroin and put it in her mouth.

"Fucking lowlife," I said, but my voice sounded far away. The woman nodded, as if to tell me I had it right and then, fast, like a snake striking, she clamped her mouth on Farmer's neck.

Farmer jumped slightly, his eyes widening. Then he went completely slack, only the woman's mouth on him holding him up.

I opened my mouth to yell, but nothing came out. As though there was a field around me and Joe that kept us still.

She seemed to stay like that on Farmer's neck for ever. I stood there, unable to look away. I'd watched Farmer and Joe and the rest of them fix countless times. The scene played in my brain, the needle sliding into skin, probing, finding the vein and the blood tendriling in the syringe when it hit. Going for the boot because it made the rush better. Maybe this made the rush better for both of them.

Time passed and left us all behind. I'd thought it was too soon to fix again, but yeah, it would figure that she'd have to get them while they were still fucked up, so they'd just sit there and take it. Hey, was that last fix a little strange? — Strange? What's strange? Nod.

Then the woman drew her head back a little and I saw it. A living needle, like a stinger. I wished I were a fainter so I could have passed out, shut the picture off, but she held my gaze as strongly as she held Farmer. I'd come to see Joe and this was part of it, package deal. In another part of my mind, I was screaming and yelling and begging Joe to take us both out of there, but that place was too far away, in some other world where none of this was possible.

She brought her mouth down to Farmer's neck again, paused, and lifted her head. There was a small red mark on Farmer's skin, like a vaccination. She wallowed and gave me that professional smile.

"That's what he came here for," she said. "Now, shall I do the next one, Joe, or would you like to?"

"Oh, Jesus, Joe," I said. "Oh, *Jesus*."

"I don't like boys," he said. And blinked.

"Oh, *Jesus* . . ."

"Well, there's only one girl here for you." She actually crinkled her

nose.

"No. *No*, oh, Jesus, *Joe* ..." I grabbed two fistfuls of his bathrobe and shook him. He swayed in my grasp and it felt like I was shaking a store mannequin. Even in his deepest junked-out stupor he'd been a million times more alive than he was now. My late brother, Joe, the original lost boy now lost for all time, the disposable man finally disposed of.

He waited until I stopped shaking him and looked down at me. I took a step back. A dull television programme he'd already seen.

"Let her go, okay?"

"Now, Joe," she said, admonishing.

I bolted for the elevator but the doors didn't open. She had the power over them, over everything, junkies, me, even toll-booths. I just stood there until I felt Joe's hands on my shoulders.

"China."

I jumped away from him and backed up against the elevator doors. There was a buzzing in my ears. Hyperventilating. In a moment, I was going to pass out and they could do whatever they liked. Standing between Farmer comatose on the couch and the kid, who was sitting like a junked-up lump, the woman looked bored.

"China," my brother repeated, but he didn't reach for me again.

I forced myself to breathe more slowly. The buzzing in my ears receded and I was almost steady again. "Oh, Jesus, Joe, where did you *find* these — these whatever they are? They're not people."

"I didn't really find them," he said. "One day I looked around and they were just there. Where they've always been."

"I never saw them before."

"You never had to. People like me and Farmer and what's-his-name over there, the kid, we're the ones they come for. Not for you."

"Then why did *I* find them?"

"I don't like to think about that. It's..." he fumbled for a moment. "I don't know. Contagious, I guess. Maybe some day they'll come for everyone."

"Well, that *is* in the plan," the woman said. "There are only so many Joes and Farmers in the world. Then you have to branch out. Fortunately, it's not hard to find new ways to reach new receptors." She ran a finger along the collar of her dress. "The damnedest things come into fashion and you know how that is. Something can just sweep the country."

"Let her go now," Joe said.

"But it's close to time for you, dear one."

"Take her back to Streep's. Stacey and George'll be there, maybe Priscilla. You can bring them here, leave her there."

"But, *Joe*" she said insistently, "she's *seen* us."

"So you can get her later."

I began to shake.

"*Joe*." The stewardess smile went away. "There are *rules*. And they're not just arbitrary instructions designed to keep the unwashed multitude moving smoothly through intersections during rush hour." She came around the coffee table to him and put her hand on his arm. I saw her thumb sink deeply into the material of his bathrobe.

"You *chose* this, Joe. You *asked* for it, and when we gave it to you, you agreed. And this is part of the deal."

He pried her hand off his arm and shoved it away. "No, it's not. My sister isn't a junkie. It wouldn't go right, not now. You know it wouldn't. You'd just end up with a troublesome body to dispose of and the trail would lead directly to me. Here. Because everyone probably knows she's been looking for me. She's probably asked half the city if they've seen me. Isn't that right, China?"

I nodded, unable to speak.

"You know we've got the cops."

"Not all of them. Not even enough of them."

The woman considered it. Then she shook her head at him as though he were a favoured, spoiled pet. "I wouldn't do this for anyone else, I hope you know that."

"I know it," said Joe.

"I mean, in spite of everything you said. I might have decided just to work around the difficulties. It's just that I like you so much. You fit in so well. You're just so — *appropriate*." She glanced back at the kid on the couch. "Well, I hope this can wait until I take care of our other matter."

"Whatever you like," Joe said.

She turned her smile on me again but there was a fair amount of sneer in it. "I'll be with you shortly."

I turned away as she went back to the couch so I wouldn't have to see her do the kid. Joe just stood there the whole time, making no move towards me or away from me. I was still shaking a little; I

could see my frizzy bangs trembling in front of my eyes. The absurd things you noticed, I thought, and concentrated on them, out of focus against the background of the fabulous antique bar, trying to make them hold still. If they stopped trembling, then I would have stopped shaking. The kid on the couch made a small noise, pleasure or pain or both, and I looked up at Joe, wanting to scream at him to make her stop it but there was nothing there to hear that kind of scream. The kid was on his own; *I* was the one who really hadn't known that. We were all on our own, now.

The dead eyes stared at me, the gaze as flat as an animal's. I tried to will one last spark of life to appear, even just that greedy, gotta-score look he used to get, but it wouldn't come. Whatever he'd had left had been used up when he'd got her to let me go. Maybe it hadn't even been there then; maybe he'd been genuinely concerned about the problem of getting rid of my corpse. Junkies need love but they need a fix more.

Eventually, I heard the kid slump over on the couch.

"Well, come on," the woman said, going over to the bar to pick up her coat. The elevator doors slid open.

"Wait," Joe said.

I paused in the act of going towards the car and turned back to him.

"She goes back to Streep's," Joe said. "Just like I told you. And you pick up Stacey and George and Priscilla and whoever else is around if you want. But you fucking leave her off. Because I'll know if you don't."

I wanted to say his name but I still couldn't make a sound.

Hey, Joe. What the hell.

If you have to ask, babe, you don't really want to know.

"All right, Joe," the woman said amiably. "I told you I'd do it your way."

His lower lids rose up and stayed shut. *Good-bye, Joe.*

"Too bad you never got to drink your cognac," the woman said to me as she put on her coat. She nodded at the snifter where it still stood on the bar. "It's VSOP, you know."

Night was already falling as she took me back across the river. She put on the Quicksilver Messenger Service tape for me. Have another hit. Neither of us said anything until she pulled up in front of Streep's.

"Run in and tell them I'm waiting, will you?" she asked cheerfully.

I looked over at her. "What should I say?"

"Tell them Joe and I are having a party. They'll like that."

"You and Joe, huh? Think you'll be able to handle such an embarrassment of riches, just the two of you?"

"Oh, there'll be a few others by the time I get back. You don't think we need all that space for just the two of us, do you?"

I shrugged. "What do I know?"

"You know enough." We stared at each other in the faint light from the dashboard. "Sure you don't want to ride back? Priscilla's friend will undoubtedly have arrived by the time we get there."

I took a deep breath. "I don't know what she told him about me, but

it wasn't even close."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Real sure."

She stared at me a moment longer, as though she were measuring me for something. "Then I'll see you later, China."

I got out of the car and went into Streep's.

After that I went home just long enough to pack my bag again while my father bellowed at me and my mother watched. I phoned Marlene from the bus station. She was out but her grandmother sounded happy to hear from me and told me to come ahead, she'd send Marlene out with the car.

So that was all. I went home even less after that, so I never saw Joe again. But I saw them. Not her, not Joe's blonde or the cop or the guy from Priscilla's apartment, but others. Apparently once you'd seen them, you couldn't not see them. They were around.

Sometimes they would give me a nod, like they knew me. I kept on trucking, got my degree, got a job, got a life, and saw them some more.

I don't see them any more frequently but no less, either. They're around. If I don't see them, I see where they've been. A lot of the same places I've been. Sometimes I don't think about them and it's like a small intermission of freedom, but it doesn't last, of course. I see them and they see me and some day they'll find the time to come for me. So far, I've survived relevance and hedonism and I'm not a yuppie. Nor my brother's keeper.

But I'm something. I was always going to be something some day.
And eventually, they're going to find out what it is.