

INITIATION

BH:

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The car pulled up out front and honked its horn twice.

"Well, it looks like you better get your tail in gear," Tom's father said cheerfully.

"Yes," Tom answered simply, as he stooped to pick up his gear. He granted slightly from its weight.

Taking notice of his son's noisy effort, Mr. Stone said, "You're getting out of shape m'boy." Tom smiled broadly, exposing his gleaming white teeth, newly out of braces.

Bouncing the heavy suitcase lightly in his hand, to make the handle a little more comfortable to hold, he started for the front door. His mother opened it for him. A chilly autumn breeze rolled in on them, lifting a shock of ~~the~~ dark hair, which his father termed as "much too long," off of ~~his~~ ^{Tom's} forehead, and laid it unmanually on the other side of his part. "Maybe I ought to get you a picket," his mother said in the style of a typical mother. Tom screwed up his mouth in exasperation.

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"Mom," he said, splitting the word into two distinct syllables, the latter slightly lower in pitch ^{than the first.} "I'm sixteen years old now. I

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can take care of myself." He could tell from the look in his mother's eyes that she was very apprehensive about letting him go. He put his free hand, his left, on her shoulder. "Look," he said, "I'm only gonna spend the night at Billi's — there's nothing to worry about."

He kissed her quickly on the cheek, and then turned to leave. "Bye!"

"Bye! Have a good time!"

"I will." Tom drew to a sudden stop. He turned again to the front door. "And Mom..."

"What?"

"Don't call to check up on me, okay?" he said hopefully. "It's kind of embarrassing."

She nodded. "Alright."

429 "Thanks, Bye-bye." He walked away, into the darkness. ~~He opened~~ As he opened the car door, the light inside the vehicle spread a yellowish glow over the area. He looked back toward the house again, and waved. As soon as he closed the door, the car started moving, and was soon out of sight around the ~~corner~~ corner.

His mother, after the car had left, heaved a noisy sigh and looked up at her husband.

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"I don't know, Gene," she said. "I'm still not sure whether or not we should've let him go off like that." Then she added, as if to convince him, "They're a pretty wild group, y'know."

Gene raised his eyes at his wife and smiled. "You're just like a mother." She laughed. "Look at it this way - I know from experience - all sixteen-year-old males are a tad wild. It's natural. You've just got to trust your son, that's all." She nodded her half-hearted agreement, and they closed the door.

179 The car full of boys had long ago passed Bill's house, and was now speeding down the ^{main} road toward their new destination, ^{twenty-seven} miles away from town. As they traveled down the road, going much too fast, but cheap, considering ~~it~~ the road's quality, though he would never admit it, the car's headlights lapped over the rocks and bushes ~~and~~ and various other items on the side of the road, showing how really dense the woods were out in that direction. More than once the National Guard had

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to be called out to find someone who had got himself lost in the endless expanse of trees.

Tom had been sitting very quietly in the back seat until that time, feeling a little guilty for having lied to his parents. He felt like he was betraying a sacred trust. Until now, he had never given them reason ~~not~~ to trust him, and conversely, and it made for a very good sort of relationship.

143 "The Golden Knights' had better be one hell of a good club, after my having to go through all this," he commented, trying as best he could to make it sound like a threat. Tom never swore, as a rule, and never, ^{did it} around his parents, and when he did, it always sounded unnatural, sort of like he had to force the words out of himself.

Tom sat ~~on~~ in silence for a few moments more, deliberately avoiding asking his next, seemingly very important question, realizing that it would ~~unmistakably~~ indicate that he was not as cool and unworried as he pretended to be. Soon, however, curiosity overtook him.

"Are we going to Old Man Decker's house?" Immediately he was angry at himself for asking the question. Even he heard the obvious fear in his voice.

"That's the only place where this road leads to." Bill's ~~answer~~ indirect answer was annoyingly matter-of-fact.

Despite the fact that it was the reply he ^{had} anticipated, the words sent a crawling sensation up his spine. Everyone knew that Old Man Decker was insane, and hated kids. ~~Tom~~ Tom had grown up with the stories about how the old man kept ~~the~~ the heads of some children over his fireplace, right next to his hunting trophies. Although he didn't believe this, there was always that small, almost non-existent shadow of doubt...

The boy felt that he would burst if he did not probe onward. "When I get there, what..." he stopped for a moment, wondering if he wanted to hear the answer, and then continued, "what am I supposed to do?"

"You'll find out when we get there," Joe, the third occupant of the car, and president of "The Golden Knights" said. Both boys

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in the front seat giggled.

Tom opened his mouth to say something, but then thought better of it. It couldn't be anything too bad that they're going to do, he thought, otherwise they could get ~~it~~ into a lot of ~~trouble~~ trouble. He decided to just sit back and wait.

To get his mind off of his initiation, and the trophies on the mantelpiece, Tom changed the topic of conversation. "How much of this land is Old Man Decker's?" he asked, looking around at the woodland surrounding them.

"All of it," Bill answered.

"What do you mean, 'all of it'?"

"Just what I said, all of it. He owns all the land since the beginning of the road."

Tom was incredulous. "Christ, that's twenty-seven miles or so."

"It's a whole lot more than that," Bill continued, enjoying the sensation he was creating. "He's got about another ten miles worth on the other side of his house, not to mention the ~~ten~~ ^{four} or so miles of land on both sides of the road." Tom gave a low whistle.

"Boy," Tom said with a chuckle, "I bet some

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real estate broker would give him a pretty penny for his land."

Bill looked into the rearview mirror at his passenger. "They've tried, but nobody's had any luck. The old goat won't give it up for anything."

Joe, who had, of course, been listening to the conversation, looked curiously over at the driver. "Just how do you know so much about Old Man Decker's land?"

Bill donned an accent much similar to that of W.C. Fields. "I'm glad you asked me that - boy. One day, when I was particularly bored, and with nothing to do, I treated myself to a trip to the library. It was then that I fastened my eyes upon the county records; completing with all the aforementioned details." The boys laughed. It was really a very good impression.

The twenty-seven mile trip took twice as many minutes, and began to seem smaller to Tom. All at once, Bill, saying not a word, slowed to about ~~thirty~~ ten miles per hour, and reached to the ~~the~~ instrument panel before him, and punched the "lights" button, which ~~and~~ went in with

a rather loud click.

As the lights went out, everything immediately became drenched in darkness. The outline of the road was no longer distinguishable. Tom found himself opening his eyes unusually wide, in an effort to see better. Bill realized that he could not keep the car on the road this way, and he pulled to a ~~dead~~ dead stop, to give his eyes time to adjust to ^{the} pitch darkness.

"Why'd we stop?" Tom asked.

"To ~~give~~ ^{let} my eyes get used to the dark."

Tom was not satisfied with the answer he had ~~now~~ received. "Then why did you turn out the lights?"

"So nobody will see us coming, ya dumbhead," was Bill's sarcastic reply.

Tom smiled sheepishly for not having thought of that himself. His smile slowly disappeared, however, when a thought, which he voiced aloud, came to mind. "What is it that you're to have me do that's that much of a secret—that is—that's so much of a secret that we have to keep our lights out?" Again the two in the front seat giggled.

After waiting for several minutes, all that Bill could see of the road was a dim outline of the right hand side. Figuring that that was as good as his eyes were going to get, ~~he~~ he drove on; very cautiously, very slowly.

Through the trees, Tom got a ^{spot} glimpse of a small yellow light shining brightly. At first he couldn't make out what it was, but as he moved on, it became obvious that it was some sort of lamp post. As they came even closer, a dark, almost black, blotch was distinguishable against the ~~dark~~ night sky, and trees. The blotch was huge; rambling. The boys knew right away that this was Old Man Decker's mansion. The light that Tom had seen from a distance was, indeed, a lamp post. It seemed strange to Tom that when he looked directly at the light, it was so bright that it hurt his eyes, while at the same time, its light was barely sufficient to ~~just~~ make visible the last portion of the walk, and the front door.

The ~~car~~ ^{car} pulled to a silent stop directly in front of the walk which led to the front door. There was a momentary silence,

and then Bill was the first to speak. "Here we are, Tommy boy."

Tom looked at him strangely, and nodded "yeah." He grunted the word, more than spoke it, and it had a note of distrust in it. He waited for the other two boys to say something, but they both remained mute. The two occupants of the ^{front seat} car, had turned sideways, ~~in their seats~~, and were looking back at their passenger. Tom looked from face to face, realizing that they were not about to tell him anything, and leaned back in his seat, and folded his arms. "Well," he said, "are you going to tell me what it is that you want me to do, or am I supposed to read your minds?"

Bill shook his head slightly, as if to get his mind working again. "Oh yeah," he said, flushing a little for his forgetfulness, "I knew I forgot something." Even through the darkness, Tom ~~go~~ could see that Bill got a special, proud gleam in his eye as he began to unravel his plot.

"Well," he began, "as you probably know, Old Man Decker is somewhat of a wine-lover. All you've got to do is go into his

house, and take ~~any~~ ^{a bottle of it,} and bring it back to us."

Tom just stared at the driver for a few seconds, his mouth hanging open. "I don't believe it," he said, softly at first, but gradually he got louder. "I really and truly don't believe it!" He fumbled for the correct words to express his true feelings on the subject. "If you know what you are? Your insane! That's what you are! Your insane!"

"And you want to join our club!" The quickness of Joe's equally loud retort caught Tom off balance. It was as though he had had it planned the whole time, and he had just ^{been} waiting for the right opportunity to use it.

Tom tried desperately to come up with a halfway decent comeback, but could not. Totally defeated, he sighed and nodded. "Alright, I'll do it." He searched his mind for all of the relevant questions possible. "While I'm doing my burglarizing routine, just exactly where do you two plan on being?"

"We'll be waiting right here for you,"

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Bill answered, again in his annoyingly matter-of-fact tone.

Hesitating with his stiffened fore-finger, ~~he~~^{Tom} continued. "Suppose," he started, "that I don't ^{TURN OUT TO BE} ~~make~~ the master thief I'm supposed to be, and get caught?"

Joe chuckled. "By who? The old man's on vacation — the house is empty." He reached into his shirt pocket and took out a thin, rectangular piece of ^{white} plastic, and handed it to Tom. "Here, use this to get inside."

Tom took the piece of plastic, and turned it over in his hands. He looked up at Joe and shrugged. "How does it work?"

The other boy scratched the side of his head as he thought of how to explain. "You work at the latch with it," he said. "You're supposed to stick it ~~into~~ between the latch itself, and the place where it's latched." Tom screwed up his face, exhibiting his lack of understanding. "Believe me," Joe continued, seeing, and identifying the look on the would-be thief's face, "it'll make more sense when you look at the window... Oh!

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That's another thing... If it's at all possible, go in through a window... they're easier to open." He made a small, almost imperceptible movement with his head, which indicated that he was finished with his instructions. ~~Tom pressed his lips together~~

Tom pressed his lips together, and jerked his head forward once. "Well, so far so good," he said.

Bill reached into his own pockets and withdrew two ratty-looking, black, wool-lined gloves, and tossed them onto the back seat. "No offence intended to you personally, Tom," he said, "but I don't have much faith in your talents as a thief. So use these so you won't leave your I.D. card all over the place." He wiggled his forefinger in the air to show that he ~~is~~ was referring to fingerprints.

Something was wrong. There was something about using those gloves that made the whole ordeal seem entirely wrong. Just the fact that he was using them so as not to leave any fingerprints made what he was about to do seem dirty or something. The gloves

made him come to the sudden realization that what he was going to do was not just a simple prank — ~~that~~ it was illegal! It was breaking and entering! He shuddered at the thought of possibly being caught, and getting a criminal record, or maybe even going to jail!

Tom wanted to say "no" so badly. He wanted to muster the courage from somewhere to just tell the two boys to drive him home. There was something inside him, however, that told him he couldn't. He knew that when they told the other kids in school what happened, they'd twist it around in such a way as to make him seem like some sort of an idiot. So he would go through with ~~it~~ it, and take what came.

Tom took the long-handled flashlight that Bill gave him, and got out of the car. It was a good fifteen degrees cooler here than it was at home. The boy guessed the temperature at about fifty. It was odd, he thought, how cold it was for only the end of September. He took a deep breath, and when he exhaled, it vaporized in front of him.

He had stopped for a moment at the edge of the walk to gather his courage. ~~He started toward~~ The house sat back from the road about forty yards. It looked terribly ominous and threatening there in the dark shadows. He chuckled quietly to himself as he thought how appropriate it would be if there was a terrible thunderstorm going on with ghouls and ghosts flying in and out of the upper windows.

As he walked on, he became aware that he had worn the wrong pair of shoes for secrecy. With each step he took, the clip-clopp noise made by the plastic heels of his boots was echoed a second later by the front of the house. It sounded for all the world like there were two people approaching the house, instead of just one.

He clicked on his flashlight, and the powerful beam cut through the darkness, illuminating much that would otherwise be hidden in the darkness. A large fish pond sat in the middle of the front yard, with water lapping up ~~of~~ over the edge and onto the grass as the ^{constant} autumn-like breeze upset the otherwise still liquid.

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Tom played his light up on the house itself. What he saw proved to him that however insane Old Man Decker might be, he certainly had good taste in landscaping techniques. Many well-groomed shrubs lined the front of the ^{big} English Tudor-style house. Olive-green ivy covered almost all of the front wall.

He stopped ^{about} three or four ^{yards} from the front doorstep. He shined his flashlight beam across the windows on the bottom floor, and quickly established that all of them, save for ~~one~~ ^a circular-shaped one next to the door, which ^{was} too high and too small to climb through, were closed and shuttered. He knew that unless it was absolutely necessary, he did not want to have to open both shutter and windows, so he decided to look around the back of the house.

He started to walk around back, but stopped short. He looked at the front door and pulled at his lower lip in concentration. "I wonder..." he whispered to himself. He quietly climbed the three steps that led to the doorstep. Even

though nobody was home, Tom felt rather jittery being ~~around~~^{paralyzed} someone else's house at eleven-thirty at night. Making as little noise as possible, he slowly closed his hand around the doorknob and jiggled it quietly. He chuckled. Of course it was locked.

The back of the house was surprisingly unimpressive. There was almost no back yard. No more than a few ~~feet~~^{yards} from the back wall, the dense, endless woods began. Again he shined the light on all the windows, and again they were all shuttered — except one. "Hel-lo," he said under his breath, "what have we here?" The pair of French windows ~~were~~^{that} Tom was staring at were the only unshuttered windows on the ground floor of the mansion. Shining the light beam through the sheer curtain on the windows, he could see the two handles that pointed away from each other, and it was easy to guess how ^{the} latch ^{mechanism} worked.

Holding the flashlight with his armpit, Tom took the white piece of plastic out of his pocket. Being careful not to touch

any part of the window with his hand, he wedged the plastic between the two windows. Using both hands, he moved the plastic upwards until it hit the latch. Backing it off just a little, he gathered his strength, and then, in one smooth, quick motion, threw the plastic upwards once again. The boy heard a click, and through the curtain, he could see the handle turn. Slowly, the window floated inward.

A little proud of himself for his accomplishment, and a little afraid, Tom put the plastic back into his pocket, and donned his ~~gloves~~ gloves. Still trying to be quiet, he took the flashlight back into his hand, and swung his right leg over the window sill, and into the dark room beyond. He pulled his left leg in after him, and closed the window again.

From the looks of the room, he determined that he must have entered through the door. A huge Oriental rug carpeted the floor. On the left wall, a ~~large~~ large fireplace stood, much like that which one might find in a ski lodge. It was made totally

of spherical stones, and in all, it stretched close to ten feet in width, and ~~all the~~ all the way up the wall, to the ^{twelve foot} ceiling. It was here that ~~the~~ ^{the player} kept his hunting trophies. Tom found that he was a little relieved when he saw that ~~there~~ ^{the} only heads above the mantelpiece were those of a boar, and of an elk — none of humans.

On the right wall, right next to the two sofas, which were situated back to back in the center of the room, sat a huge mahogany ^{desk}. It appeared to Tom, that complete with the brass drawer pulls, and the gold-plated desk set and accessories, the desk must have cost somewhere in the area of five hundred dollars.

From where he stood, in the back left corner of the room, Tom could see the front door, the main hall, and, almost a ~~direct~~ ^{true} diagonal from him, ~~he could see~~ the entrance to the den ^{from} through the main hall.

Although the bright light of his flashlight was sufficient to dimly illuminate everything in the room, Tom ~~perceived~~ ^{began guessing}

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clockwise around the room,
it, over the individual objects, searching for
the spot where the old man might keep his
wine. Clock... easy chair... small table... Door-
way... window... In the front, left-hand corner
of the room, a small, cubicle-shaped table sat. At
first, the boy ~~had~~ passed over it, but then he
brought the light back onto it.

The box-like table, like most everything
else in the room, was made of dark wood.
He walked closer to it and saw that on the front
of it was a little door that opened outward.

"It's as logical a place as any for the old man
to keep his booze," he thought. As he walked still
closer to the cabinet he was being as careful as
he possibly ^{could, so AS NOT TO} ~~knock~~ knock over or bump into any
objects in the room.

He was now standing directly in front of
the cabinet. Kneeling down on his right knee, his
left forearm resting on his raised left knee, ~~Tom~~ ^{he}
pulled gently on the wooden knob on the door. As ~~the~~ door
opened, it creaked noisily. The boy stopped abruptly
and listened. Anyone coming? "You fool! Nobody's home.
How could somebody be coming when no one's home?"
Just the same, he opened the door as quickly as
possible, therefore eliminating the loud creak.

The flashlight beam showed that Tom had chosen

the correct place to search for the wine. The cabinet was filled with row after row of bottles — all of which contained a variety of wines. The boy was astonished at how far back the bottles dated. The oldest that he could see at first glance was, ^{from} 1805. He gave a low whistle. He ~~grabbed~~ ^{grabbing} the newest bottle he could find; 1957; ~~and~~ ^{he} stood up. After all, he thought, there's no sense in getting his oldest ones — they were probably very valuable.

Tom closed the door of the cabinet and stood up. He examined the label on the bottle closely. The flashlight beam on the gray piece of paper, ^{which} ~~that~~ was beginning to peel off of the dull glass surface, made it seem purplish in color. The ~~label~~ printing on the label was in a foreign language - French, he thought - and he couldn't figure out what kind of wine it was. But all they had asked for was a bottle of wine, and that's what he got. He turned to leave.

The boy's misadventure turned a somersault as
the darkness around him ^{was} suddenly ignited
WITH A STRIKANT, WHITE ILLUMINATION, WHICH VIOLENTLY CONTRASTED
~~with the darkness at the moment he~~
~~was struck by the light.~~ PERFECT BLINDING FLAME.
blinding white light. The light stung his eyes
badly, and he had to squint in order to
see anything. "Stop right there, boy," an old,

raspy voice said. ^{IN THE DIRECTION FROM WHICH THE}
Tom whirled around, ^{HEARD THE VOICE,}
^{HE FOUND HIMSELF FACING}
~~the distance to the door - the direction from~~

MORE
DETAILED
DESCRIPTION

~~which the voice had come.~~ An old man
of about sixty-five or seventy, ^{WHO} was standing
in the doorway ^{TO THE STUDY}, his countenance frighteningly
stern. The old man was dressed in a pair of
old jeans, and a red and black-plaid, flannel
shirt. His hair was a blackish-gray - very
unattractive, Tom thought - and ~~was~~ looked
as though it hadn't had ~~the~~ a comb
near it in months. ~~His~~ hairline was
receding, and bald skin could be seen
to about halfway up his head, and there
was ^{very} little hair. ^{THIS OLD, YELLOWISH EYES WERE SET}
^{DEEPLY INTO THEIR SOCKETS THAT THEY WERE}
^{HIDDEN}
~~in the black shadow which was cast by his protruding~~
~~forehead and eyebrows, which were grotesquely covered by a~~
~~thin, almost non-existent layer of~~ ^{PALE} ~~skin.~~
made the young man shiver a little.

Tom took the frightening figure in slowly,
~~peering~~ his eyes scanning him in a straight
line, from head to foot. The boy's sparkling,
blue eyes suddenly grew wide as they fell upon
the old man's ^{beady} gnarled, arthritic hands which
were tightly grasping a large, .30-06 hunting
rifle. The ~~end~~ lens of the telescopic sight which

was clamped to the top of the gun reflected the bright light of the lamp above the two people. The thief released his grip on the still-burning flashlight, and let it fall to the floor. As it hit, he heard the quiet ticking of the broken lens. His eyes never moving from the muzzle of the weapon which was threatening his life, Tom reached behind him and put the wine bottle on top of the cabinet. In the same motion, without ~~himself~~ thinking, ~~at the~~ the boy put his hands up in the air, his ~~upper~~ ^{upper} arms sticking straight out, almost perpendicular to the rest of his body, and his elbows bent.

He looked up at the old man, finding it an effort to take his gaze off of the gun. He got a sheepish expression on his face and tried to smile, but abandoned the attempt, realizing what it must have looked like.

"What are you doing here, boy?" the old man asked again.

The boy's expression was unchanging—as though he hadn't even heard the question. He turned his head slowly from side to side, examining, once again, the objects in the room, most of which had been hidden by their darkness when he had first entered. He

had not seen before ~~that~~ the many, intricately carved adornments on the walls and fireplace. It appeared to Tom that the house belonged in the English countryside. A very rustic-looking chandelier hung from the center of the ceiling, ~~casting~~ swinging gently from the breeze stirred up from the old man's entrance, casting a bright light over everything, which seemed to pulsate from the rhythmic swaying. In the light, ~~he~~ she could see that the walls were abundant with pictures of the old man, in most with his weapon in hand, standing by the animal which he had apparently just killed. It appeared that the old man hunted only very big game: lions, a white Bengal tiger, bears, even rhinos and elephants. Tom gathered from the pictures that the man who was ~~about~~ pointing the gun at him, ~~was~~ ~~the~~ ~~Decker~~ and the one in the photos were the same people.

"If you must be Old Man... er... Mister Decker." Tom could have kicked himself for his lack of diplomacy.

Decker squinted slightly at the youth. "Gah," he said, "What's it to you, though?"

Tom knew that this was the time for an explanation if ever there was to be one. There was a strange look in the old man's yellow eyes which, ~~he~~ Tom thought, bore an air of insanity. He didn't ~~the~~ want to take any chances ^{NOT NOW -} ~~not~~ with the way he was ^{holding} that rifle. ^P But how do you explain something like that? ^{He thought} You can't just say that you're robbing his house as a prank. Or can you? Sure... it's the truth. That's it then - ~~he~~ tell him the truth; he'll understand. But... well, anyhow, what's the worst he could do to me? Call the police? Have me arrested? Maybe he'd... No! That'd be murder... Oh, God, why did I go along with them? Why didn't I just stay in the car and tell them what to do with their stupid club?"

Tom looked deep into the old man's visage, trying to get an idea as to how he would react to the upcoming explanation. The effort proved fruitless. The captor's expression was unchanging. "Well you see, sir," he began, using the word ⁱⁿ sir the same way that he used it with his father, when he was in trouble, "this was all kind of a joke - on me." The youth was hoping that

he looked as afraid as he really was — ^{maybe} he could get the old man's sympathy on his side. "That is to say," he continued, "that it was part an initiation prank. You see, I want to join this club at school, the Golden Knights, and as my initiation, I was to break into... or rather come into your house and take a bottle of wine. Only you weren't supposed to be home." Knowing that he must be sounding like an absolute dolt, he again smiled sheepishly. He shrugged.

"But I guess we were wrong there, weren't we?"

Decker's stern expression changed slightly. Tom could feel his spirits lift when he noticed that the old man's mouth was drawing back into a bit of a smile. Thinking that Decker must have understood, Tom went on with his explanation. "I know it was a dumb thing to do, and I really apologize if I caused you any trouble, sir."

The smile on Decker's face became broad, and he began to laugh. Tom chuckled a little, too, but ~~couldn't find it within himself~~ mainly from relief from a tense situation. He could not find it within himself, however,

to laugh. He looked strangely at the man. It wasn't right, he thought, that he should be laughing like that; not the way he was. The laughter seemed to be ~~uncontrollable~~, ^{in a way that} the boy ~~had~~ ^{had} never heard before; it was almost like hysteria.

Suddenly, for a reason he didn't know;— perhaps because ^{the} minute jerk of the old man's right hand; the one whose finger covered the trigger of the rifle, Tom let his legs fold beneath him, and his body fall to the floor.

In the same instant there was ^{THE SHARP} ~~a loud~~ ^{EXPLOSION,} ~~clapping~~ ^{of a rifle shot}, ~~much sharper than~~ Tom had thought ^{upper right} a rifle shot would be, and the corner of the cabinet, ^{just} ~~right~~ above his head, exploded into an array of splinters which fell silently in the ^{lingering} ~~rear~~ of the ^{gun} ~~rifle~~ ^{shots}.

Tom's eyes were wide, darkening, as he raised himself into a crouching position, ^{up to his} ~~up to his~~ ^{floor}, much like ~~that~~ a sprinter about to leave his mark. He ~~was~~ dumbly watched the old man spit the spent cartridge, and prepare to fire again. ~~He was out of total~~ ~~and absolute fear~~ ~~that~~ ~~the boy launched~~ ~~himself at the old man, and struck~~ ~~him~~.

with all his plunging force, under ~~the~~
chin with ~~his~~^{his} forearm, which ~~was~~^{was} extended
in front of him, in the style of a lineman
in football.

As Decker fell, the rifle discharged, ^{the bullet drilling itself into the plaster of the ceiling.} ~~chafing~~
close to Tom's ear, ~~the~~^{the} ~~bullet~~^{bullet} staggered a little from
^{the combined force of the} the impact with the old man, and the report
of the rifle, but fear was still in control of
his body, and he ran toward the window through
which he had entered. Despite the fact that
he had been run over by the youth, the
old man was still laughing hysterically.
It seemed to him that ~~the world was moving~~
~~the world~~ everything was happening in
slow motion - like in those nightmares
he had all the time, where no matter how
hard he tried to run, he couldn't go
anywhere. ~~The path that he was presently~~
was one of the massive rafters which ~~stood~~^{stood}
back-to-back. Without slowing at all, the
boy ~~stepped~~^{stepped} up on one ^{side} of the rafter, ran across
in 2 long strides, and he jumped
the rest ~~and~~ down the other side.

When he ^{finally} reached the window, he put his
hands on the sill, and swung his feet around,
and through the closed panes, pushing & shattering
pairs of glass and wood panes in all directions. As

DIRECTLY
IN HIS
PATH

he fell out onto the grass, he heard a third shot which ripped a huge chunk of brick away from the side of the window.

Things were happening too quickly—he didn't know what he should do—except run. But where? The car! He picked himself up off of the dew-moist grass, and charged around the side of the house, toward the ~~house~~ road, the car, and safety. As he ran, Decker's laughter diminished in the distance until it was inaudible.

— CHAPTER —

Moments earlier, outside in the car, Bill shifted uneasily in his seat. He kept looking at the luminous dial of his watch, which shone green in the darkness, and then up at the house. He was feeling terribly guilty. Tom was a good friend—maybe he shouldn't have made him do this. It was Tom that wanted to join the club—no one made him—and the invitation went along with the membership. But still, he had treated the other two boys—it somehow just didn't seem right.

Bill's mind had been engaged in this silent battle with itself ever since Tom exited the car. The prank sounded like

it would be great fun when it's still in its planning stages, but now it seemed wrong. What bothered Bill the most, was the fact that Tom trusted them so much, and then they went and betrayed him.

He turned his attention to Joe, who was sitting across from him, leaning against the door. His head was resting on the closed window; his eyes shut. Bill wondered for a moment as to whether or not the other boy was asleep, hoping he was not - he felt like talking with someone to ~~take himself off~~ break the monotony.

"Hey Joe?" Bill said, his tone very tentative, almost questioning.

"Huh?" Joe more grunted than spoke his response. Bill could tell that he was almost asleep.

Bill turned his head away from his friend, as though he didn't want to look at him when he asked his next question. "Do you think we should've told him?" he asked.

→ Joe, ^{replied} straightened up, and yawned loudly. He stretched his cramped body, which was beginning to feel the soreness which results from sitting in one place for ^{so long} ~~very long~~, and replied, "told him what?"

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Bill sighed. "You know... About Old Man Decker... About how he isn't really away."

Joe didn't even ^{HAVE TO} think about his answer before blurtin' it out. "Heck no. That's what's fun about it. Besides, if he knew ^{he} it was house, he'd have never gone in."

Bill turned back to the other boy, his face all screwed up. Joe's logic seemed so ridiculous that it was almost maddening. Almost to himself, he muttered, "Man, he could get into a lot of big trouble."

Joe seemed to explode with anger. ~~He~~ He thrust ~~out~~ out a stiffened forefinger until it was about an inch from ~~the~~ the other boy's nose. "Now look!" he shouted, "Nobody twisted his arm to go in there! If he gets caught, it's his own fault, and the same goes if he gets arrested! In no way did we force him to go — he went completely under his own power. ~~He~~ ^{Joe} had nothing to do with it. Got it?!" Bill was on the border line between agreeing, getting into an argument, ~~and~~ and giving him a smart-alec come-back to take him off balance. His problem was quickly solved, however, when Joe answered his own question. "Well you better have got it!" he said threateningly, "because

that's the last time I'm gonna say it!"

Bill was taken aback slightly. This was the first time that Joe had shown any emotion since the whole ordeal of the initiation began. In fact, he couldn't remember ever seeing his colleague quit this mad at anything before. His last comment must have hit a sensitive nerve, he thought. Maybe he was just trying to cover up his

Bill ~~always~~ suddenly realized that he was afraid of Joe. On several occasions he had seen Joe beat someone who crossed him to the floor—always using techniques which Bill's father had ~~always~~ told him were classified as "dirty fighting." He was always terribly methodical and cruel in his fighting, using mostly the heels of his shoes, his knuckles, and open hand to put an opponent away in a matter of seconds, in the style of an experienced henchman. Few people, if any, admired him for this talent, but most did feel ^{a strange sort of} respect toward him. Until now, Bill had always been on Joe's side, but now that he was a position where he might feel some of ~~the~~ ^{this} ~~Joe's~~ wrath, he was frightened. Although he still felt ~~that~~ ^{that} Joe was wrong, he conceded defeat, and fell silent.

TRANS  The silence was short-lived, however, for

something caught Bill's eye that worried him. On the front of the house, ^{ON THE SECOND FLOOR WERE} ~~the~~ the first and second windows ~~the~~ ^{right} to the left of the front door were, ~~on the ground floor~~, there seemed to be a series of horizontal yellow lines. They sort of faded in and out of the darkness, but it was obvious that they were actually there, and not just a part of his imagination.

Still without a word to his companion, Bill opened the car door and got out. Resting his forearms on the roof of the car, he stared intently at the lines, trying to figure out what they were.

Joe, who had just noticed the lines, also got out of the car to get a better look. Immediately he identified in his mind what the strange lines were. "Dumbass," he said under his breath, almost inaudibly. "Duh?"

"The stupid ass turned the lights on." Joe's tone was one of total disgust, although there was a slight note of compassion—or fear—for the way much the mansion, but it went unnoticed by Bill.

Light shining through the shutter slats—of course! Why couldn't Bill have

thought of that himself? Why do you
suppose he turned all the lights on? ~~That~~
Maybe he was caught - oh God! The
same stories about Old Man Decker flooded
through Bill's mind now. That same doubt
which was ever-present in Tom's brain was
eating its way into Bill's.

Both boys jumped a little as, for an instant the door being unaccounted from the house flashed brilliantly. So short was the flash that a blink of an eye would have caused them ~~not to~~ ^{to miss} it. ~~directly~~. Closely following the flash was a sound which ^{could} easily have been taken ^{that of} a shot. ~~And~~ the boys looked at each other, mouths open. It was ~~as~~ though they were having a silent conversation with each other. ~~Color~~ Color drained from their faces as the horrid realization came over them, neither wanting to say the words out loud.

There was another flash, and another report. "Jesus Christ, he shot him!" Bill shouted, as though the person ^{to whom} he was speaking was a hundred yards away, rather than right next to him. He was already turning the ignition key when Joe was pulling his foot into the car and closing the door, preparing to ^{take off} ~~get out~~ to get the police.

The wheels of the car spun on the dirt as the driver jammed the accelerator to the floorboard, in his attempt to get away. He yanked the steering wheel hard to the left, until it reached its stopping point; the linkage loudly expressing its unwillingness to comply with the demands of its master. The car was going much too fast to make the "U" turn on the narrow road, and went nose first into a shallow gully which ran the length of the rutted dirt road-way.

~~They~~ ^{on the opposite corner} As he reluctantly pulled at the gear-shift lever, until the little red indicator in front of him rocked on "R", they heard the third shot. There was a sinking feeling in the boys' stomachs when they admitted to themselves that their friend was dead - there was no doubt - no one could miss three times - not a hunter like Old Man Decker.

When they had finally maneuvered the car into ^{the correct} position on the road, the two boys sped off toward town. Because of huge clouds of dust thrown into the air by the tires, they could not have possibly seen the thin figure of a sixteen-year-old running ^{toward the street} from behind the house.

Tom just stood, motionless, in the middle of the uncut, dew-soaked grass of the mansion's front lawn. He stared as though death itself was hidden somewhere in the ^{thick} cloud of dust which rose lazily from the road.

He was suddenly overtaken by violent, convulsive shivers, ^{which made his body ache. He was quaking} partly from the damp, biting cold which seemed to penetrate his entire body, but ~~largely~~ ^{largely} from the hopelessness of his situation. Amashuan was ~~at the~~ ^{at the} ~~house~~ ^{house} ~~leaving~~ ^{leaving} ~~him~~ ^{him} ~~alone~~ ^{alone} ~~in~~ ⁱⁿ the middle of the wilderness, more than twenty miles from home.

Time was what he needed most — time to let his mind catch up to the things going on around him. ^{TIME TO THINK THINGS OUT.} But, as he soon found out, time was one thing that he could not have. For as he stood there, staring vacantly into the quickly-disappearing cloud of dust, ^{the} black, weeping ~~head~~ ^{in a far distance} silhouette of Old Man Decker glided through the darkness from behind the house. The figure was carrying his rifle — a thin, black object in the ~~dark~~ ^{dark} night, whose ~~dark~~ ^{dark} highly-polished breech reflected the unusual brightness of the half-moon over head.

The figure stepped on a twig which lay in

the middle of the yard. The snap of that small piece of dead wood might just as well have been a cannon; the sound ripping through the almost total silence which even the usually ostentatious crickets dared not ~~disturb~~ disturb.

As though a strange force had taken over his body, Tom turned and charged into the thick woods, never looking to see what was the origin of the snap. As he ran through the underbrush, it seemed as though the roots from the trees which surrounded him were grabbing at his chimney, booted feet, making him trip, and fall several times.

For some reason, he never looked back to see if he was being followed. The crawly feeling on the back of his neck assured him in his mind that the old man was but a few strides behind him, and slowly gaining. He noticed each time he felt large pieces of flesh being torn from his body, ~~by~~ or bruised by the merciless limbs of trees and bushes. He felt something strange - something warm - running down his shin, but ignored it. There was no time to stop and investigate anyway.

The boy found himself marveling at how ~~much light~~ there was absolutely no light

under the thick canopy of leaves above him, despite the brightness of the moon. He never realized it, but unconsciously, he had closed his eyes tightly, to protect them from being harmed by any twigs or branches.

Tom could feel that he was slowing down. His strides were becoming shorter, and not as fast as they had been. It seemed like his breathing was being controlled by his steps, exhaling each time his right foot hit the ground. The knife-like pain of a cramp grew increasingly intense and excruciating ^{beneath his ribs,} each breath he took making it hurt more.

In the blackness, an unseen, low-lying tree limb extended across ^{Tom's} path, and caught him right in the stomach, in mid-stride. He somersaulted completely around the limb and landed hard on his back. ~~He~~ He made contact with the hard ground, the lay made a slight barking sound as all the air was forced out of his lungs. Helplessly he gasped for air which would not come. Panicked, he arched his back high off of the dirt, ~~to the~~ grotesque sounds coming from his throat until his oxygen-starved body became ^{voluntarily} satisfied.

He was very still, in a prone position. His

Chest was heaving up and down gratefully for its ability to ~~catch~~^{catch} breathe. A white jet vaporized breath shot upwards about two feet, and then disappeared into the sky.

There was a rhythmic thumping sound pulsating in the youth's ears as he slowly rose to a sitting position and dragged himself over to a nearby tree. He grasped his head painfully, his temples aching from the continuous throbbing of ~~his~~^{blood} in his arteries, which told him that he had been running for too long. ~~His~~^{It} ~~felt~~^{felt} as though ~~his~~^{his} ~~front~~^{front} were whirling around inside his skull, making him dizzy.

His mind was blank - vacant of all thoughts, as though giving the boy a short reprieve from his confusion. Too many things were being put into his brain too quickly - he had to think ~~them~~^{them} out. But everything was kind of fused together, ^{into an indecipherable jumble of words & pictures} he had to separate all the thoughts and facts from each other. Then he could start from the beginning and put it all in its ^{proper} place and perspective.

Slowly, the pounding ^{in his ears} stopped, the loud chirping of the crickets, which again began to fill the still air, took its place. There was something soothing, relaxing about the sound - that pulsating chirp. It reminded him of home, and of the camping trips

and other week-end outings his family used to take. Until now, he never knew how much he enjoyed those excursions, despite the furious arguments ^{with his mother in which} he would always end up getting involved. Oh, God, how he wished he was home.

He was suddenly ^{much} colder. Not cold as a result of the weather - it was beyond that. This was a new kind of coldness he had never felt before. It felt like it was coming from within his body, rather than anything outside it. He felt chilled, and he shivered again, and he realized that it was lucky that he agreed to wear that ^{raggy} pair of raggy wool-lined gloves.
HE BROUGHT HIS LEGS UP CLOSE TO HIS BODY & WRAPPED HIS ARMS AROUND THEM, RESTING HIS FOREHEAD ON HIS KNEES.

Despite the boy's desperate attempts to prevent himself from coming to grips with the subject at hand, the horrible nightmare of what was happening to him leaked its way into his thoughts. "Why is he doing this?" he thought. "What did I do that he's trying to kill me for?" He opened his eyes ~~suddenly~~ suddenly. "Wait a minute!" The thought came to him unexpectedly, from left field, as his father would say. It was as though someone had opened a door, and there it was: the answer to his problems.

He was thinking audibly now, in sort of a stage whisper. "You fool! You bloody,

ignorant fool! He's in on it! Why else would they drive away? They drove away because Old Man Decker's part of the initiation! Boy, did they ever get you, you rap!"

He was angry at Bill and Joe for pulling such a stunt, but was too relieved at the thought of no longer being shot at, ~~had~~ to care much. "You should have realized it a long time ago," he continued, as if trying to convince himself that his theory was correct. "Look, his man following you. Probably never was. He'd have caught up by now. Fol."

all at once, he was warmer. His spirits became heavy, and he soon fell asleep to the contented song of the crickets. He felt secure.

Maybe it was because his eyes were closed, or possibly it was because ~~he~~ he just chose to ignore it. At any rate, the boy ~~had~~ ^{had} no ~~real~~ reaction when a wiry-headed silhouette silently ~~glided~~ ^{peeked} out at the lad from behind a nearby tree, a highly-polished object in his hand, which brightly reflected the moonlight above.

more
description

- CHAPTER -

The speedometer needle was vibrating on 80 as Bill steered the car down the winding road leading from ~~the~~ Old Man Decker's house.

Both of the occupants of the car were silent, staring vacantly ~~into~~ at the objects along the road which, for a split second, were illuminated in the beams of the headlights, and disappeared again into the darkness.

→ There was no need for them to speak. The same thought was common to both their minds; they had to ^{get to} ~~contact~~ the police.

They had been driving for about fifteen minutes when they got their first glimpse of the lights of town. Bill slowed the car down

opposite sufficiently to make a left turn onto Main Street without even screeching the tires. After

recovering from the turn, however, he stomped on the accelerator, the car surging ⁱⁿ response. Main Street was relatively straight and flat, so it was not long before the speedometer was approaching ^{the} 90 miles per hour mark.

Both boys saw the motorcycle entering onto Main Street from a side road at the same time. Before Bill had a chance to move his foot from the accelerator to the brake pedal,

DESCRIPTIVE
TRANS. ←

the speeding car slammed into the other vehicle broadside, sending both the cycle and driver tumbling over the hood ~~off~~.

The windshield was a mass of shattered glass, making it impossible for Bill to see where he was going.

All controls ^{of the car} having been lost, the ~~car~~ Mustang charged across the the left side of the road. ~~and into the curb~~ As the now skidding car's left wheel rode up over the curb, the vehicle left the ground, and flipped over in mid-air. The sportscar landed hard on its roof, and slid in its inverted position for over 200 feet before it literally became folded around a telephone pole, and burst into flames.

~~There was a screaming from within~~

Residents of the area ran from their houses toward the wreckage, and those who were close enough heard a ~~weak~~ ^{meaning sound from the inside} ~~weak~~ ^{DESPERATION COULD BE SEEN} ~~clenched fist~~ ^{protruding from the twisted metal}, but it ^{soon} went limp, and it, too, like the rest of the car, was soon engulfed in flames.

— CHAPTER —

Everything seemed so peaceful there in the woods. The song of the crickets to which ^{you} ~~he~~ had fallen asleep had now, in the bright light of early morning, been replaced by that of what must have been hundreds of birds. The chirping seemed to be synchronized into one loud, pulsating squal which came from all directions. The canopy of leaves above filtered the sunlight into a series of thin, clearly defined, transparent white ~~lines~~ ^{lines} which ~~changed~~ changed the colors of all things with which ~~at~~ they came in contact.

As he awakened, the boy's mind was vacant of all memories of the previous night. Although his eyes were still closed, he could tell that it was a sunny day. He sort of perceived a lighter ~~darkness~~ ^{darkness}. His ^{eyes} ~~eyes~~ raised a little, but immediately closed tightly again as the poking fingers of sunlight worked at his pupils. Although they seemed to fight him back, they forced his eyes open. His eyes focused on low-moored mulch which covered the floor of forest, and he became disoriented and frightened.

His body felt stiff and cramped from being
curled up in his fetal-like position
all night.

45

He moved his head hurriedly from side
to side, and stopped abruptly. As he turned
his head to his right, all of the horrifying
events of the night before came back to
him with an impact comparable to that
of a blow with a sledgehammer. Just inches
from his head was the perfectly round muzzle
of a .30-06 rifle. ^{HE DROVE FOR THE GROUND, ETC.} Seconds later, he was sprawled
face down on the ground, nervously awaiting
the sound of rifle fire. None came.

He slowly raised himself up and looked
behind him apprehensively. He screwed up
face as he saw that the weapon he feared was
propped up in the fork of a small tree. ~~Why~~
~~He~~ "Holy God Almighty," he whispered.
"They're really going all out for a joke."

He got to his feet, and strolled over to where
the rifle lay. As he walked, there was a crunching
sound from the brown leaves which had just
begun to dry out from the night-time dew.
He picked up the gun and held it firmly in
his hands. The wetness he felt on the wooden
stock and hand grips was evidence that the
weapon had been out in the night air for some
time. ~~Assuming the gun was not a joke~~
~~and was really a joke~~
~~the joke was over~~

Tom had had a fair knowledge of the workings of a rifle for some time, as a result of instruction he received from his father. For weeks his father took him out every night to practise his shooting, in preparation for a hunting trip he had planned. At first, he started his lessons with a .22 calibre bolt-action rifle, until he learned the basics - how to hold the gun, how to aim it, and how to fire it. As he progressed, however, he switched to the weapon he was to actually use - a ~~Remington~~^{G. Sauer}. The boy learned to shoot from the kneeling, prone, and standing positions with amazing accuracy, having a bit of a problem with the latter of the positions. The rifle being as heavy as it was, he found it difficult to keep the barrel still; to keep it from going around in little circles, since he had nothing to hold it rigid, ~~unlike~~^{unlike} the other positions.

At last the day came when their hunt would begin. He remembered thinking that 4:30 was an awfully hour to be starting off on any kind of an excursion, but they had a forty-mile drive ~~to~~ to undertake before they reached the rendezvous point at which they would meet up with the rest

B46:30

THATNESS
LEFT,

of the hunting party. It was on a Friday,
so they had to be prepared for the rush
hour traffic which always clogged up the
roadways.

He could never forget how proud his
father ~~to~~ looked when he got out of the
car and introduced his then 14-year-old
son to the other men with whom he worked
at the office, and with whom he had organized
the expedition. The boy was embraced with
everyone reaching out for him, and ruffling
his hair, and patting his shoulders, and those
assuring comments, "So here's ~~the~~ our little
hunter..." "my but aren't you getting to be the
big man..." "Well here, it won't be long till
you've got a grandson..." Then everyone would
laugh. Why did they have to say those
things? All it did was make him
blush, and then they'd laugh more, and
he'd get redder.

It was funny how his Dad always
smiled when Tom was uncomfortable, and
then invariably managed to do just the
right thing. He'd say something like, "Hey,
Sport, why don't you go straighten up the
car," or something else which would immediately

relieve him of all his embarrassment by removing him from the spotlight.

That whole trip turned out to ^{be} a disaster. Tom felt good being there, ^{in the woods} with a powerful rifle with other men, hunting deer. It was a feeling he could never explain, it was just one of those things. Sort of like he had suddenly grown up in one short moment from a fourteen-year-old boy, to a fourteen-year-old adult. When he took the time to think about it, he decided that the feeling came merely from the fact that he was trusted enough by a group of men to carry a rifle along with them. They came upon their first herd of deer at about 10:00 that morning, and it was then ~~that~~ conditions began to deteriorate.

They ^{very} slowly and quietly walked through tall grass which tickled the boy's ~~all~~ over his short socks, getting gradually closer to their prey. When they were close enough, the group stopped. Tom's father put his hand on his son's shoulder. "Okay, Sport, why don't you take the first shot?"

The boy nodded his approval of his father's suggestion and very deliberately took

to one knee. Supporting his bent elbow on his knee, the boy took careful aim through his telescopic sight. He set the crosshairs squarely at the base of a big buck's neck.

NO!
HE THINKS
ABOUT IT,

Then, suddenly, without saying a word, he pointed the weapon almost straight up in the air and pulled the trigger. The rifle report sent the ~~now~~ terrified deer charging in all directions in front of a group of ^{WIDE-EYED,} very surprised hunters.

Tom was in front of the rest of the party, but he could feel their eyes burning into the back of his head. He had a hard time mastering the courage to turn around and face the others. There was a certain recurring feeling of ~~peacefulness~~ seriousness that poured over him as he watched the matted grass pop back to an apricot point, as though having forgotten all about the deer stampede of a few moments before.

"Tom..." The boy felt his father's voice tear through his stomach. He was going to have to explain himself, and he didn't know how to go about it. "Turn around, Son." The voice was gentle but insistent. The boy slowly pivoted on his left foot until he was

face to face with six angry men and one confused father. ~~They~~

"Alright now, would you care to explain what you just did?" His father's voice had that same ~~same~~ instant but gentle tone.

Tom screwed up his face and shrugged. "I don't know." Immediately he was sorry for giving that answer. The men were still staring - awaiting his true reply. The boy opened his mouth to speak twice, but both times nothing came out. He felt so terribly ~~embarrassed~~ ashamed.

"The real reason is that it's wrong!" He blurted the answer out so ^{quickly} loud, that he even startled himself. His father made no movement that was perceptible to any of the others, but Tom ~~recognized~~ saw his whole forehead raise - sort of like ~~if~~ there was great tension there which suddenly relaxed. This was the telltale sign of understanding on the part of his father.

His father's reaction was of the utmost importance to him ~~that~~ time. "I can't tell it," he continued. "It's... it's like murder!" The young boy's voice cracked, and tears began to flow down his

(51)

cheeks. "He's too... too ~~good~~ pretty!" Tom could feel his insides being torn ~~away~~ away bit by bit with each word he spoke. ~~But~~ His voice had now been transformed into sobs, ~~and~~ and he could no longer continue speaking.

WRITE

Again his father's ~~kind~~ good timing saved the day. He turned to his friends in the party. "Maybe next time, fellow," he said. Tom felt his spirits lift when his father's hand gripped his shoulder and nudged him forward. "C'mon, son," he said, "Let's go home."

And that was it! No reproaches, and no scolding — it was almost as though his father shared his feelings — at first, anyway. It was a ~~quiet~~ ^{proper} walk back to the car. Tom could tell ~~from~~ ^{from} his father's expression that he was disappointed that all of those hours of training had been for naught.

~~He was~~ — something for which the boy was terribly sorry. The car was in sight when Tom stopped abruptly in his tracks. "What's the matter?" his father asked, turning around, having noticed that his son was no longer at his heels.

The tears which had stopped just moments before began flowing once again. It was one of those instances where he really didn't know ~~why~~ why he was crying, he just did it — ~~like~~ like there was someone inside of him controlling his emotions and making him ^{gloober} ~~gloober~~. His father went to his knees and held his son at arm's length. "Hey," he said gently, "what's the matter? What's with the flood?" He ^{tried} made a futile attempt to make the boy smile.

~~For that~~ The sobbing gave Tom the hiccup; making it difficult to speak. Every time he tried, his voice broke up. "I'm sorry," he finally said, after a lot of effort.

His father shrugged and chuckled — totally baffled. "What for?"

Tom had ~~of~~ regained most of his composure. "For not being able to ~~do~~ tell the deer," he said matter-of-factly. "And for running your trap."

Mr. Stone sighed loudly ~~and~~ and shook his head. Being the same as most fourteen-year-old boys, Tom

would have ordinarily expected to the way that his father hugged him, but right then the affection felt ~~good~~ ^{good}. Mr. Stone stood up, and, still holding his son close to him, walked over to the base of a tree, and sat down. He took his son's rifle and put it on the ground, along with his own. He patted the ground beside him. "Sit down here, sport," he said. ~~After~~

Never ~~looking at his father's face~~ ^{up}, the boy followed directions and sat down on the chest next to his father. He felt uncomfortable. He tried to avoid direct eye contact by playing with the chest ~~and his fingers~~ — picking up a handful of it and letting it run through his fingers.

"Look, son," ~~Mr. Stone~~ ^{Mr. Stone} said. He was speaking slowly and very distinctly — as though he was trying to choose each word separately. "I don't ever want you to be sorry for something that you ^{truly} feel is right — no matter what it is. You're a very intelligent boy, and if something inside you tells you that something is wrong, I would be very upset

"If ~~you~~ ~~you~~ ~~went~~ ahead and did it."

Tom looked up from the ground, and the dirt dropped from his hand. The tears were no longer present in his eyes, but his feeling of shame was still quite evident.

"But I'm pretty much grown up now," he began, "I'm supposed to be able to do those ~~things~~ things. It's part of being a man.

Every guy I know brags about their hunting trips, and how many deer they got, or how many squirrels they got, and I can't even pull the trigger—really I can't.

Why do I have to be the oddball?"

Once again he lowered his eyes to avoid contact with his father's.

His father sighed even louder than before.

"Don't you understand," he said, "that this is what I've been trying to tell you? It doesn't matter what they do. You're the one you should be concerned about, not them. And I'd be willing to bet that half these kids you're talking about have never had a gun in their hands."

There was a trace of a smile appearing on the boy's face, making it much brighter.

"Do you really think so?" he asked. His voice

was excited.

"Of course." Mr. Stone knew he was making progress with his son, and he persisted. "You're no oddball. You never have been. It's just that your personality, and your brain ~~is~~ is unique to you. There isn't another person in the whole world like you, and vice-versa. That's why you might feel differently than other people on something."

"You're probably wondering what happened out there today. ^{well,} killing a living ~~thing~~ being is one of those things that sounds easy enough to someone who hasn't done it, but sometimes something happens to a person when he ~~pulls~~ starts to pull the trigger. He can't kill it. It feels immoral, ^{to him} or something. You happen to be one of those people, but I'm not. This doesn't mean, ^{though} ~~however~~, that you're ~~not~~ wrong or that I'm ~~not~~ wrong, it simply means that we feel differently on the subject, and we should observe each other's preferences. Do you understand that?"

Tom nodded. His smile was now full scale. They rose together, and headed for the car, Mr. Stone carrying both rifles. This

converston brought the two of them closer together than any other single incident since Tom was ~~born~~ born — a closeness which was never to waver for a moment.

3

In examining the gun, Tom noticed that there was ~~still~~ a rectangular indentation in the underside of it, where a clip was to be inserted, which was empty. He grasped the handle of the bolt which hung down the right side of the rifle and pulled it up and back. He was startled a little when a shiny brass cartridge was ejected from the breech, twirled end-over-end in the air, and then fell to the ground with a thud.

He just looked at shell ~~at~~ ^{on the} ground for ~~and~~ a moment. He couldn't imagine "Old Man Decker" would give him a loaded gun. Maybe it's not a real bullet. That's it! a defective bullet! But why go to all this trouble? He stooped down

and picked up the cartridge, and turned it over in his hands. He noticed ~~that~~ with a little chiselt that his white fingernails, which contrasted nicely with his dark, sun-tanned skin, ~~and~~ were covered with dirt.

He looked at the back side of the bullet to see if the percussion cap was still intact, and saw that it was. Then he brought it close to his ear and shook it violently. He could hear the powder inside. Now why in God's name would he give him a live bullet?

Totally confused, he slid the bullet back into the chamber, pushed the bolt forward and secured it.

"Don't worry," a voice boomed from somewhere, "the bullet's real!" Tom whirled in the direction from which he thought he heard the voice. He was aghast when he realized that he was holding the rifle very tightly - ready to shoot.

"Oh my God," he whispered. "I would have done it... I would have killed him!" He lowered the gun to his side - muzzle pointed at the ground.

"I thought about it last night, and I determined that it would be more sporting to give you a gun."

Tom recognized the voice as Decker's, but it sounded different from last night - not

of like it had no real place of origin — as if coming from the heavens. "But you'll have to be careful what you shoot at ^{HE CONTINUED} 'cause you've got only one bullet, and that's all you're gonna get!"

Tom did a quick about-face. The direction of the voice changed — it was echoing off of the many trees, making it impossible to discern ~~its~~ ^{BACK} source. "C'mon, now!" he shouted. "I've fallen for your joke, so now let's quit, huh?" Tom was still convinced that everything was part of a joke.

Decker let out a loud, shrill, laugh — that same sadistic laugh of the night before. "You're looking in the wrong direction!" he yelled. "I'm behind you!" Tom whirled around again. "No, I'm over here!" The frustrated boy turned in whatever direction he was told, never to find the old man.

"Damn it!" the boy yelled (he ~~was~~ was trying to sound forceful). Tears of anger and frustration began to fill his eyes almost to the point of overflowing. "Come on out! It's not funny any more!"

"Oh really?" the voice shrieked from the trees. "I think it's very funny!" He laughed even louder.

Tom could feel panic growing within him as he stood there. He turned around and started to run. He had taken only two steps when there was

HAPPENS TOO QUICKLY

a loud rifle report. It felt like someone had brought a sledgehammer down on his left hand as a .30 Calibre slug tore through it, sending ~~a long jet of blood, bone, and~~ blood, bone, skin and pieces of glove splattering to the ground. The impact of the bullet turned him completely around in mid air and laid him face-up on the ground. The boy's entire arm felt as though it was on fire, the intense pain generating from his bloody and broken left hand.

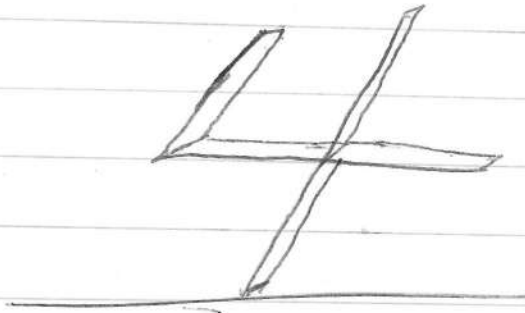
Had he the time to do so, he would have passed out right then, but he was brought back to his senses by another rifle shot, followed by another, and another. Bullets were ~~plunging~~ ~~into the ground all around him, tufts of dirt~~ ~~flying into the air~~ tufts of dirt flew up into the air as bullets ~~plunged~~ ~~plunged~~ plunged into the ~~air~~ all around him. Never having released his grip on the rifle, the boy got up and stumbled into the protective cover of the ~~forest~~ thick green foliage.

"That's it, run!" the old man yelled at the fleeing boy, firing another shot. "Run! Run! Run!"

Tom was running aimlessly - in whatever direction he was pointed. ~~He~~ He felt no pain at

HAPPY TOO QUICK

all in his hand, his mind filled only with getting away. He became slowly aware that what was once a forest full of bright colors had turned into a dull world of black and white. A roaring sound grew in his ears, and he ~~felt~~ ^{was} very dizzy. ~~He could feel~~ Someone's legs beneath him becoming very light, then equally as heavy, and then light again. He staggered to a stop and blinked his eyes, trying to clear his vision. ~~At~~ The floor of the forest started to tilt severely, and ~~the~~ ^{then} ~~the~~ rushed up to him quickly and hit his cheek with a thud. Darkness.



~~Edo~~

The dampness of the earth was making his clothes stick ~~clinging~~ ^{stuck} to his body as Tom awakened slowly - painfully. He was sprawled face down in a spread-eagle position, his arms and legs sticking straight out from his body.

He was working his mouth strangely, bothered by the unpleasant salty taste ~~of~~ of blood. He ran

his tongue along his ~~front~~ ^{DISCOVERED} teeth to find the source of the blood, and ~~found~~ a deep gash in his upper lip. It must ~~have~~ happened when he fell.

For several minutes he laid perfectly still, waiting for any of the telltale signs of Old Man Decker: ~~the~~ rifle shots, footsteps, and worst of all - that laughter. The cool, damp, soft ~~air~~ ^{earth} felt good on his cheek. His conscious was telling him to stay where he was - to sleep, while there was a driving force from within him to run - run in any direction at all, just to put some more distance between himself and the old man.

~~Tom was~~ Tom felt little pain from his hand. There was just a dull, throbbing ache at the end of his arm. He was a little relieved. He had always been under the impression that ^{when} a person was shot, he was in constant, uncontrollable pain all the time. When he moved ~~his~~ his hand, however, he learned that his impressions were correct. Excruciating pain seemed to ~~eat~~ ^{beat} at his entire arm.

Raising ^{to} his ~~head~~ ^{knees}, he reached over and pulled his shattered left hand close to his body. He staggered over to a nearby rock and sat down. His features were distorted by intense pain. He gingerly cradled the gloved hand in his arms, much the same as if it was a small child. Using his teeth, the boy pulled the glove

more
description

off of ~~the~~ his right hand, enabling him to more aptly deal with the painful process of removing the one on his ~~right~~ left. Some of the fleece lining which had been turned inside-out by the bullet was soaked crimson. It took him a full five minutes to take ^{off} the glove. When he thought he was about free of the glove, he ~~yanked~~ ^{grunted} loudly, for some of the fibres had become caught fast in the dried blood around the wound. When ~~the~~ his hand was finally free, he gave a long sigh of relief.

The bullet hole was directly between ^{his} ~~the~~ second and third fingers, and blood was still running freely from it, ^{the droplets} forming ~~even~~ star-like splatters on the rock on which he was sitting. The slug had torn completely through his hand, leaving a large flap of skin hanging down from his palm, where the bullet exited.

His usually thin and nimble fingers were swollen into red, stubby logs, and seemed to be locked in a stiffened position, making movement of them impossible.

Blood was running faster now — too fast. It had to be stopped. He tried to remember what his Boy Scout handbook told him about stopping the flow of blood from a wound. You have to apply direct pressure, he thought. He needed a bandage of some sort, so he ^{carefully} removed his light blue

shirt, which was stained in many ^{places} ~~places~~. Having done this, he laid the shirt next to him on the rock, and set to work at removing his "V" shirt. It was terribly awkward working with only one hand, especially when pulling ^{the foreign material} ~~it~~ over the ~~disgusting~~ spots on his back which were sticky with sweat. But after only a minute or so, he had the shirt ^{free of} ~~from~~ his head and right arm, leaving it dangling limply from his injured left. ^{TAKES IT OFF}

He leaned back a ~~little~~ ^{little} and straightened his right leg in order to gain access to his front pocket, from which he withdrew a small pocket knife. ^{WHICH HE OPENED WITH HIS TEETH.} His father had always stressed the importance of keeping ~~a~~ a knife very sharp at all times, so he had little trouble cutting the undershirt ^{FROM AROUND HIS HAND & THUMB} down the middle, into two pieces, which he folded ~~carefully~~ ^{carefully} into squares which could easily be mistaken as squares. He very carefully placed one of these squares on either side of the wound, the cotton fabric turning red almost on contact. To hold the patches in place, he tied his blue shirt around them as tightly as he could (the ~~light~~ ^{tightness} of bandage ~~also~~ helped to slow down, and eventually stop the flow of blood from the hole).

When he had finished, his hand was wrapped in an enormous blue bandage, ~~and~~ with the end

HIS

of the shirtleeves hanging ~~down~~ freely. He looked at the bandage and chuckled. "That," he said aloud, "has got to be the worst-looking bandage I've ever seen." Looking at it a little longer, he added, "But what can you expect from using one hand and your mouth to tie a knot?"

~~Then~~ Tom found that if he kept his hand raised, it would stop it from throbbing. ^{He} He leaned back a little, his face still showing evidence that he was in pain, although a little less severe than before. He looked down pensively at his chest, which was rising and falling a little faster than usual with his quickened breath, and frowned. The area outlining the base of his rib cage was a grayish-purple. He wondered what caused it and then remembered the tree limb he collided ^{with} the previous night. This was the first time he had had a chance to look at himself since this whole nightmarish ordeal began.

A dark stain ran down his right pant leg from his knee and over the top of his ~~booted~~ foot. He brought his leg up to his chest so that his knee was just under his chin. ^{His} Using his thumb and forefinger, he spread a slit in his knee pants to expose a thick scab on his kneecap. The cut was caused by broken glass which

because lodged in his skin when he threw himself through the french windows at Old Man Decker's house. It's okay, he thought, there's no infection. But it'll leave one heck of a scar. So what? Scars add to someone's personality, anyway.

The finely-chisled features of his face were swollen out of proportion from vicious slashes received when running through the woods. He ran his hand along his cheeks and jaw, and found many scratches, now covered over by scabs, and each surrounded by a lump of swollen flesh. A string of filthy hair fell down over his left eye, and he unconsciously pushed it back into its proper place; an action which annoyed his father to no end. "I don't understand it," he'd say. "It doesn't make sense to me, ~~why~~. If your hair is so long that it inconveniences you by falling into your eyes everytime you look down, ~~why~~ why don't you get it cut?" Tom never did understand why it bothered ~~at~~ him so much, but he'd just shrug and answer: "Because it's the style." A gentle breeze made the lock of hair flop back down on his face, and again, without thinking, he pushed it back.

It was really an awfully nice day,

around the yellow center.

As his wife approached the table, Mr. Stone got to his ~~feet~~ feet and took the platter of eggs and bacon from her.

"It sure looks good, Honey," he said, holding his lips.

"You're right," she said, smiling.

He started to chuckle, and her husband looked up at ^{her} strongly. He ~~was~~ tapped his right temple with his forefinger, smiled broadly. "You've finally cracked, right?" he said. "Life just got to be too much for you, huh?"

"No," she said, wrinkling her nose, and sticking her tongue out at him, "I haven't finally cracked. I was just laughing because I remembered that this morning when I was setting the table, I had this place all set, with milk poured, and everything, before I realized that he wasn't here this morning."

Mr. Stone laughed. "See," he said, "I told you you were losing your mind. You have ~~absolutely~~ the symptoms — a short memory span, bursting into laughter for no apparent reason,

✓

OK

5/13/54 H

and..." She didn't let him finish before she started laughing, too, and threw her napkin into his face.

After they had finished breakfast the two of them left the table to sit in the family room to read the Sunday newspaper. Although the Stone family was Catholic, they seldom went to church anymore. None of them really knew why, but then again, none of them ever thought about it much. Maybe it was just sort of ~~unpractical~~ impractical to do so. On occasion, Tom would wish that they went more often, but then he would forget about it, and not say anything. At any rate, it had little if any effect on their lives.

Mr. Stone went directly to the front door, opened it, and stooped down to pick up the paper, which lay right at the foot of the door stoop. He had always meant to thank the newsboy for carefully wrapping the paper with rubber bands (one on each end) but he never got around to it. He especially appreciated it on windy days when, with the previous paper bags they had had, the various sections of the paper would be spread around the yard.

He ~~was~~ put his large hand around the tubular paper, so that his thumb and fingers met on the other side, and shot the rubber bands off, and, ~~put them~~ having nothing better to do with them, put them in ~~the~~ the pocket of his robe. While he was still walking, he opened the newspaper, and snapped it hard once to keep it from sagging. As he looked at the front page, he stopped ~~in his tracks~~ abruptly. In the center of the page, positioned right next to each other were the pictures of Tom's two friends, Bill Stevens, and Joe Walters. Just to the right of the two pictures was a ~~relatively~~ large headline which read:

TWO BOYS KILLED IN HIGH SPEED AUTO CRASH

All traces of color drained from his face, his mouth forming the words, "Oh my God," but no sound coming out. His head completely still, the man's eyes went rapidly back and forth, searching the two-column story for some mention of his son, who ~~he~~ was supposed to

have been in the same car, but apparently he was not, for the article said nothing about a third occupant in the car. At the end of the second column of copy, written in bold type ~~was~~ were words that said that the story was continued on page A4. The paper crackled loudly as Mr. Stone fished through the pages to find the correct one. He laid it on the dining table so it wouldn't droop, and ran his ~~for~~ forefinger down the line of type searching for the final portion of the news story. When he found it, there was still no mention of Tom.

Mrs. Stone walked into the room at that time and knew instantly from the look on her husband's face that something was terribly wrong. ^{as she entered,} He just looked up from the paper on the table and said nothing. Mrs. Stone tightened visibly, standing more erect than usual. "It's Tom, isn't it," she said softly, cautiously. "Something happened to Tom..." ~~this I register~~ Her husband was still silent. "Well, am I right or not?" Her tone was insistent.

Mr. Stone sighed loudly and shrugged. "I don't know," he said. "I simply don't know. According to the paper..." He stopped for a moment and pursed his lips pensively. "Look, maybe

(6)

"you better sit down." Her eyes never moving from ~~her~~^{their} fixed gaze on those of her husband, Mrs.

Stone's hands found the back of one of the wooden dining room chairs, which she pulled out, and they guided her around to the front so that she could sit down. "Well first of all," he continued, "there is really nothing to base our worrying on, but this paper here says that Tom's two friends, Bill and Joe were killed in an auto accident, and yet they make no mention of Tom."

Mrs. Stone's expression was unchanging. She could not see what he was getting at — what one thing had to do with the other. "Don't you see?" he said, "last night Tom left to spend the night at Bill's house ... in the same car."

His wife noisily exhaled the breath which she had unconsciously been holding since the beginning of her husband's explanation, and a slight smile crossed her face. "Is that all?" she said, relieved. "I thought you were going to say that it was Tom that was killed."

"That's just it!" Henry Stone said, a little exasperated. "What happened to him? Obviously he wasn't with Bill and Joe like he said he was going to be, so where was he ...?"

better yet, where is he?"

Mrs. Stone's expression had become one of concern, and yet her smile of relief was still present. It seemed that, for the moment, there was nothing to worry about—only things to be grateful for. How could it be considered bad news that her son was not killed? No... everything would be all right. "Maybe he's still over at Bill's house," she suggested, at length. Her husband ~~was~~ acknowledged this as a possibility, but then added that if this was true, Tom would not have wanted to stay in a house where ^{A DEAD PERSON} ~~somebody~~ had once lived, and even if he did, he would call home to prevent them from worrying ^{And why would he be at Bill's house when he was in the city?}

"At any rate," Mr. Stone ^{conceded} "one thing that we can do is call the Stevenses and see if he's there." A strange look crossed his wife's face, and he added quickly, "Don't worry, I'll be very tactful." He had, until that moment, been leaning on the table, his palms on out-spread newspaper, and when he turned to leave, he had to stop and peel the paper from the back of his hands, which were black from the newspaper. Out of habit he neatly folded up the paper and placed it on

the table.

Mrs. Stone did ~~not~~ ^{not} move from her chair, but still could hear the ~~characteristic~~ ^{characteristic} scraping ^{sound} of her husband dialing their wall telephone, which was located just around the corner, in the kitchen.

6

The convulsive trembling which had so overtaken the boy had now all but stopped, making things much more comfortable. The pulsating throats in his shattered hand had subsided, and from what Tom could tell, because the bandage was ^{no longer} ~~not~~ wet against his skin, the bleeding had stopped. That was a relief - at least he wouldn't bleed to death.

Move on. He had to move on. He thought the words silently, but for a moment ~~he~~ he cringed. He could have sworn that he said it aloud - that he shouted it - that every living thing in the woods could hear him. You're a fool. Nobody can hear you. Get going. Can't let him catch you - he'll start shooting again.

The boy still could not accept the fact that Decker was trying to kill him. He ~~would~~ ^{could} not even think of the word, kill — he would not think of it. In his mind this was ^{still} some sort of a sick game — nothing was for real. Even the bullet hole in his ~~hand~~ ^{arm} would go away and cause him no more pain. He would run on aimlessly through the woods until he declared that he didn't want to play anymore, or until he woke up, and then he would be back home in his safe, warm bed, with his parents, or back in school with his friends, and then all would be right again.

He suddenly realized that he was uncomfortable; sort of stiff — as though he had been in the same position for some time. But how could that happen? He just got there. Could he have fallen ~~asleep~~ ^{asleep} again? Maybe passed out? Oh, well, no matter. He had to move on. Unconsciously he drew in a deep breath and held it as he pushed himself away from the tree on which he was leaning, and up to a standing position. The skin showed the deep, red indentations caused by the rough bark of

A loud, gurgling rumble was muffled from his stomach. Tom laughed quietly. "Good lord," he said in a raspy, dry voice, characteristic of

someone who had gone without water for
 as long as the boy had. "I'm hungrier than
 I thought I was." He was to soon wish that
 he did not think of his hunger, because it would
 not leave his mind, causing severe hunger pangs.
 He pursed his lips once again, as he tried to
 remember how long it had been since the
 last time he ate. Although he could see no sky
 through the thick canopy of leaves, he judged
 by the streaks of sunlight and the white mist
 which hung close to the earth that it couldn't
~~be~~ be much more than ^{eight} 8 o'clock. So that
 made it at least ~~to~~ fourteen hours since
 his last bite of food. "Good God," he raved.
~~Oh God, I am~~ "I am hungry."

The youth ran his dry tongue over, challo-
 like teeth, which, ^{were} still loose and aching from
 the braces which were removed just three
 days before. Their surfaces felt crusty, and
 still had the metallic taste of blood. There
 was a bitter, unpleasant taste in his mouth,
 which he could not rid himself of - it was
 sort of dusty. If only he could have something
 to drink... Oh God, ~~what~~ what he'd have given for
 a Coke - with lots of crushed ~~and~~ ice - just like
 the drug store served. Or an ice cream soda.

Maybe even a milk shake. Oh God!

Grabbing his rifle by the muzzle, and holding his wounded hand up ^{in the air} to stop the throbbing, Tom started ^{to} further into the woods. He was trying to get to the unpaved road he had traveled not much more than a few hours before. He was depending solely on his sense of direction to lead him to the road, and, eventually, civilization, but for all he knew, he could be traveling around in circles, or worse than that, in a completely different and wrong direction.

As he walked on, he was careful not to let any branches or twigs scratch his already badly scraped face. With each step he took, his feet, ~~would pick up~~ which seemed to be dragging themselves along the dirt, would pick up large amounts of wet leaves, making a rhythmic swishing sound. He ~~thought~~ wished he had worn a different pair of shoes than he did. The tall heels on his boots kept turning his ankle whenever he stepped on a rock, or ~~something of that sort~~ ^{any other irregularity in the forest's floor}. He should've worn his crepe-soled desert boots — they're much more comfortable. Dumbass!

There seemed to be a halo ~~around~~ around his face as the streams of sunlight hit the

many tiny hairs that the boy would remove from his face on the next of his bi-monthly shavings. He had just started shaving a few months before, and enjoyed doing it very much. It made him feel grown up. He was proud of the fact that, as yet, he had never cut himself.

It was weird. There seemed to be a sound coming from within him. But yet it was not really a sound ~~sound~~ — it was more like an awareness of something moving, or better yet vibrating, deep within his bowels. Yes, maybe? No. ~~It was~~ different than that. He knew he had felt it before, ^{but he couldn't place it} but a second? No — now he was definitely ~~hearing~~ hearing it; not just feeling it. What was it?

He stopped to listen more intently to the strong, baffling sound. He closed his eyes tightly and put his tired brain to work, trying to identify the sound which he knew he was familiar with. Good, it had been so long... It was gradually, and steadily growing louder and louder. WHOP-WHOP-WHOP-WHOP... What was it? WHOP-WHOP... It was coming to him. WHOP-WHOP-WHOP... An engine of some sort? Yes, an engine! A helicopter... "A helicopter!" ^{By} God, that's it! A helicopter! He ~~repeated~~ ^{croaked} the words quietly, in a sort of quiet, nervous excitement. He was still worried that Old Man Decker

might hear him.

Tom lifted his face skyward to get a look at the helicopter, but the canopy of leaves was unrelenting. Suddenly he was overtaken by panic. He felt that he had to see this one sign that a sane world still existed, or else... ~~well~~, he didn't know what would happen, but he knew that it would be very bad.

He started to run. The interminable ^{through which he had been suffering} nightmare [↑] had obviously begun to take its toll on the youth. His young legs no longer had the muscular power to propel his body with much speed. His slashed right knee ~~was~~ had stiffened and swelled, and all of his elongated leg muscles felt as though had become contracted and bruised from the battering and over-use they had received the previous night while making ^{this} ~~his~~ hurried exodus into the woods and out of the sight of the old man. The tall, heavy black boots on his feet had become almost too much of a burden for him to bear. Despite his exhausting efforts, his feet refused to give up their contact with the forest floor. Unconsciously, he was ^{not} making complete use of the energy which his jaded body offered. He was aware, somehow, without thinking about it, that running any harder than he already was would

spite his sprained, shattered hand, thus causing those unbearable shooting streaks of pain to devour his ~~shattered~~ injured extremity.

All the time while shuffling along, the boy, his head uplified, was desperately ~~but~~ looking for a hole in the carpet of leaves overhead which seemed to join the ~~big~~ tree tops with one solid mass of greenery which would relent to nothing but the thousands of layer-like beams of sunlight which gave the woods its whitish look, and whose origin could not be traced, for the straight lines of light seemed to vanish as they approached the canopy of leaves, WOP-WOP-WOP... It was getting louder—closer.

The boy's breathing was becoming rapid and difficult in his anxiety to get a look at, and possibly signal to the pursuing machine which filled what seemed to be the entire world with its aggravatingly rhythmic voice. Until this moment, he did not know how powerful an affect the whole ordeal had had on him. The continual, unceasing beat of the ~~pursued~~ helicopter's engine was tearing ^{the} ~~his~~ very soul from his body, leaving nothing but the hollow shell of a suddenly very small boy whose metabolism was kept going solely with the blind fear and dread of missing ~~the~~ the sight of the aircraft.

Hood Hood, there it was! That long sought-after break in the leaves lay but a few yards in front of him, in the center of a dense thicket. He battled manfully with the stubborn bushes and creepers which ~~seemed~~ seemed intent on barring his entrance into the damp haven of green, untouched, and unmatted grass, and the small trees and evergreens which were fantastically arranged by the flawlessly artistic hand of Mother Nature. Many tall trees, the botanical names of which he had no idea, stretched high into the blue above. It was strange, the youth thought, how the tall trees, ^{in this thicket} were arranged in an almost perfect square, leaving a large, clear view of the sky overhead. The boy's face became contorted ~~as~~ and his mouth opened a little as the bright, unfiltered sunlight stabbed at his eyeballs, making him squint, until ~~they were~~ ^{they were} merely slits for him to peer through.

The unholly loudness of the ~~helicopter~~ approaching helicopter had left most of the surrounding trees vacant of birds. As he stared excitedly through the opening, the object which he had been waiting so long to see finally appeared. He knew from what his father had told him that the ~~the~~ relatively small ^{green} biplane above was a Huey. The glass windows on the underside of its nose reflected brightly the round, water-like image

PUTS HIMSELF
INSIDE

of the sun. It was so close to the ground that he could easily see the fluorescent orange flight suit, and the shiny red helmet of the pilot. For a very brief second, the youth felt his spirits rise at the sight of the ~~and~~ aircraft; then fall abruptly, as if cut down with an axe. How could he get a signal to it? How could he let the pilot know he was there? His gaze fell from the sky down to the rifle, whose barrel was tightly ~~clenched~~ held in his clenched fist. "Do you suppose..." The words ~~scattered~~ ~~of him~~ croaked rawly from him, as if they completely bypassed his mouth, and came directly from his dry, parched throat.

Thoughts raced through his mind as he changed his gaze from rifle to sky and to rifle again several times: "If I fire, will he notice... If he does, he'll get help here... It's my only way out... But with only one bullet... What if Old Man Decker hears the shot and comes by? I'll be helpless... But I've got to... One bullet..."

The helicopter passed through the hole in the tree, and then out of sight just as Tom ^{had} made up his mind to shoot, and

(25)

take his chances on the pilot's noticing.
His finger was tentatively tightening its grip around
the trigger as the sleek figure of the aircraft
disappeared from sight ^{behind} ~~into~~ more leaves.

It was gone — forever. "No!" He shouted the
word as loudly as he could, though his best effort
was rather weak. "No! No! No! No! No! Come
back!" Masses of anger, ~~and~~ distress, and
fear welled in his eyeballs, close to the point
of overflowing. "I'm here! For Nook's sake, come
back!" He was waving his gun in the air; a
futile signal to the helicopter whose engine
noise was quickly fading to silence.

Suddenly he whirled around, his eyes and
facial features showing his rage. The rifle butt
was now against his hip, the barrel pointed upward
slightly. "Cinon!" he yelled to the ~~forest~~ ^{forest} he knew
~~was~~ ^{THE OLD MAN} harboring ~~him~~, his voice cracking, ^{rearing}
an octave for an instant. "Cinon out, you bastard!
You gave me just one bullet, so come on out to
hiding and give me a target!" The propensity
was no longer forced — it came easily, as though
it had been lubricated ^{OR LUBRICATED}. "Damn it, you dried
up old son-of-a-bitch, ^{I NEED} give me the one chance!
I don't need anymore than one shot to tear
your skull apart!" There was no response —

3

which
is

Tom almost didn't notice it. The wind
had slowly, and subtly stopped, but he noticed,
with steadily increasing fear and dread, ^{that} the

rustling of the leaves had not. It was getting violent, green shaking and falling all over the ground. He knew that this rustling was not an act of Nature — it was intentional. Decker!

The old man came charging through the bushes with a loud, ear-piercing scream. ~~He shot~~ His rifle was in one hand, and his gray hair was swept up on end. Tom raised his own gun, brought the butt to rest on his hip, and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. His mouth dropped open a little, adding an air of stupidity to his countenance, and glanced down at his malfunctioning gun. Another deafening gunshot (something he felt he should ~~have~~ be used to by now) ripped a hole in the peacefulness of the forest, and sent a hunk of lead ~~off~~ ^{drilling} with smashing force into the ~~forward~~ ^{STOCK} ~~handgrip~~ ^{of the boy's rifle}, transforming the smooth, highly-polished, varnished wood into a jumble of white splinters. ~~The impact~~

The impact of the bullet wrenched the weapon out of Tom's hand and sent it flying into denseness of the surrounding thicket. ~~He~~ He turned his head to the side as his eyes followed the path of his gun into the bushes. Still confused by the rapidness with which everything was happening, he turned back toward Decker. He closed his mouth, swallowed, blinked his eyes chunkily and let his jaw drop once again.

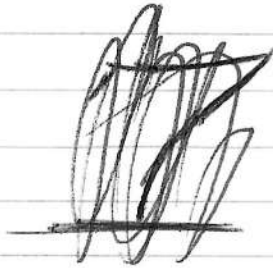
(65)

Without changing his expression, he watched, almost as though he was entranced by the other's action, as the Oklauman swung the butt of his rifle at the boy's face.

The sharp carous of the rifle butt contacted with Tom's cheek, making a crunching sound as it smashed his skin into the bone of his skull. He felt, at that moment, that his brains were reduced to a gelatinous liquid which sloshed about in an empty cranial cavity.

The green, ~~and~~ sunlit forest exploded into a multitude of blinding colors.

He fell.



~~Detective Spentigan Backner was sitting lazily at his desk, back in his chair, his feet crossed and resting on the desk. He looked the ghost of his 1960's - spitfire black paint typical suit was open, and his white shirt was pulled taut, ^{exposed} his fat, hairy belly ~~between~~ ^{between} two of his buttons. A soggy green cigar, ^{which he talked around,} was clenched tightly in his teeth. The smoke of which filled the room with a ^{thick} ~~white~~ cloud. Resting on his thigh was a clipboard on which he was writing something illegibly on a piece of paper. His shoulders were scrunched up around his head, almost totally concealing the black telephone receiver which was pressed up against his ear. The phone call ended~~

---CHAPTER SEVEN---

Detective Lieutenant Hackner was sitting lazily back in his chair, his feet crossed and resting on his desk. The jacket of his 1960s-vintage pinstriped suit was open, and his white shirt was pulled taught, exposing his fat, hairy belly between two of the buttons. A soggy green cigar which he held tightly between his teeth filled the room with a thick gray cloud of smoke. Resting on his thigh was a clipboard on which he was illegibly writing something down on a piece of paper, and his shoulders were scrunched up around his head, almost totally concealing the black telephone receiver which was pressed tightly against his ear. The phone call ended with a short, quick nod of his head. "Uh-huh...Right...Fine. I'll talk to you later...Right...Bye-bye." Using just two fingers, the lieutenant laid the receiver on its cradle with a dull thud.

240
Out of the corner of his eye he saw a policeman^{in a blue uniform} approaching his office door, and he mechanically adjusted his tie. The man in blue was leading two others, a man and a woman, both of whom appeared very distraught. Through the glass in his office door, the lieutenant could see that the couple ~~were~~ was terribly upset, and he inwardly prepared himself for a lot of crying on the part of the woman. That was the one thing that he truly disliked about being a cop: the crying women. And with his particular assignment, in the missing persons department, he ran into an unusually great number of these.

The man in blue did not even knock before opening the lieutenant's door and ushering the couple inside. "Lieutenant,"

the policeman said, ~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~ "this is Mr. and Mrs. Stone, and I think you should talk to them." The inflection in the officer's voice led the Lieutenant to believe that this was not a matter of terribly great importance.

Hackner got to his feet and pointed to the two chairs that sat next to each other in front of his desk. "Won't you sit down, please," he said. He noticed that the other police officer was still standing awkwardly in the doorway, waiting to be dismissed by his superior before leaving. "That will be all Officer. Thank you," the fat man said with a slight nod of his head.

As he sat down, he ground the green cigar which had burned itself into virtual non-existence into the clear glass ashtray which was on ~~xxx~~ the corner of his gray steel desk. The detective's office somewhat resembled a fishbowl in that it was surrounded on ^{two} ~~xxxx~~ sides by exposing the rest of the busy office to his small room, glass, and on the ^{fourth} side, directly behind his desk, was a large picture window which looked out on the parking lot for the police station. On the walls there were ² no decorations with the exception of one large map of the area which took up almost all of the only remaining area of solid wall. Lined up along the front of his desk were pictures of his wife, his sons, both as small boys and as adults, and a long string of grandchildren's pictures, all with bright smiles, and facing toward him. He was very proud of them.

The Stones were silent in their seats for an uncomfortably long length of time until the lieutenant started up the conversation. "What can I do for you," he inquired earnestly.

The couple in front of the desk looked at each other as if each was waiting for the other to start. Then, as irony would have it, when they realized that neither was going to start, they

both started together and once again stopped, embarrassed.

"Look," Hackner began, assuming the role of a moderator, "Mr. Stone, why don't you begin?"

"Okay, fine," the other man said agreeably. "The problem is that our son is missing."

"I see," the detective responded without thinking while reaching into his desk for the necessary forms which needed to be filled out. He reached into his pocket and removed a pair of half-glasses which put on, and he picked up a pen off of his desk. "I gather that they got your address and all that other stuff from you when you came in, so I won't bother you with all that right now. But what I do need, though, is some other information. ^{HOW OLD IS YOUR SON?} ~~Now then,~~ ^{"SIXTEEN"} ~~and~~ how long has he been missing?"

Mr. Stone looked at his watch and screwed up his face, pensively puckering his lips together. "Let's see. Well, it's at least been thirteen hours. He left home at about ten fifteen, or maybe ten ~~thirty~~ thirty, and we haven't seen him since."

33 Hackner looked over the tops of his lenses at the couple for a few seconds before saying anything. Then he carefully laid his pen on the desk and inhaled deeply. "I don't really know how to tell you this," he began, forcing a slight apologetic and embarrassed smile, "but the laws in this state say that anyone who is sixteen or over cannot be considered legally missing until he has not been heard from for twenty-four hours or more, or unless there is sufficient reason to believe that there is foul play involved. Now is it possible that your son might have been kidnapped of some thing of the sort?"

The lieutenant felt bad as he watched Mrs. Stone frantically pick

through her purse in search for a handkerchief as tears began to flow down her cheeks. Used to this sort of reaction to his seemingly heartless questions, the lieutenant opened the top drawer of his desk and took out a box of Kleenex which he handed to the crying woman. Mr. Stone, bending over, trying as best he could to comfort his wife further explained the situation to the detective.

"You've got to understand our position, Lieutenant. You see, first of all, in my wife's present emotional situation, I think mentioning the possibility of a kidnapping is just a little much for her to handle. Plus the fact that I really don't think that it would have been a kidnapping...at least not when you consider the strange sort of circumstances under which Tom, that's our son, Tom is, not when you consider the circumstances under which he disappeared." Hackner looked puzzled.

"The situation, or rather circumstances that I'm referring to is the fact that our son was ^{supposed to be} with a group of two other boys who picked him up at our house last night. But the strange thing is that the other two were killed last night in a terrible auto crash involving the car that my son was supposed to be in. But in the newspaper reports, and, for that matter, in ^{the} police reports, no mention whatsoever is made of a ^{Thomas} ~~Tom~~ Stone." The lieutenant still made no indication as to what he thought of the matter. Mr. Stone continued. "So considering the bizarre nature of this case, don't you think that the state laws would allow an investigation?"

The officer nodded slowly, and then sighed again. "I really don't like to sound obstinate, but you've got to understand my position. You see, I'm sort of in the middle of all this. I

didn't make the laws, but I've got to go along with what they say. You see the state has to protect itself. In most cases like these, it turns out that the kid was just angry at his parents, and he decided to go away to blow off a little steam, and then when they get hungry they turn up again."

Mr. Stone's upper lip was beginning to quiver from the anger that was obviously building up within him. ~~XA~~ "Lieutenant," Stone began, his voice carefully measured so as not to show ~~that he was~~ ^{HIS RAGE,} ~~mad,~~ "I do understand your position. The point is, I think, that you aren't even making an effort to understand mine." The fat man inhaled sharply, preparing to speak, but the other man did not yield the floor. "My son wasn't angry when he left, so he has no steam to blow off, and even if he did, our family is close enough that he knows that whatever he has to discuss can be discussed with us without hesitation. So you can see that it ~~wouldn't~~ wouldn't even be like him to run off even if he was mad." The two men stared at each other for a few seconds. "Well, how about it?"

Hackner nervously ~~adjusted~~ ^{loosened} the tie which he had adjusted just moments before, and undid his collar. He hadn't been put on the spot like this for quite a while, and he didn't really know what to do. "Listen, Mr. Stone, I really do understand, and I feel for you. But the laws still state..."

Mr. Stone jumped to his feet, causing the chair he was sitting in to fall backwards with a loud bang. The expression in his eyes was frightening to the lieutenant, and caused him to ~~unconsciously~~ ^{unconsciously} lean back a little in his chair.

"Screw the laws!" he shouted. "There's only one thing that I know for sure about this case, and that's the fact that my son is missing and for all I know, could be bleeding to death somewhere, and here you sit, in charge of a whole division of policemen, not even moving off your fat ass in an effort to find him, spouting laws like some goddam computer." Hackner leaned forward and extended his forefinger in Stone's face, starting to say something, but the other man would not ~~yield the floor~~ ^{BE SILENCED}. "Let me warn you, Lieutenant, if you don't do something about this, and something has happened to my boy, I will personally see to it that the newspapers and television stations drag you through the mud so much that you won't even be able to get a job as a night watchman!"

The two men stared angrily at each other for a moment, and then the detective spoke: "Alright. First of all I want to say that my decision is not based on that last dumbass comment you made about the night watchman. Threats really don't go over very well with me. In fact, if I didn't feel for your position, I'd probably book you right now. But at any rate, I've decided to put some people on the case. You convinced me when you mentioned ^{the} that bit about him bleeding to death somewhere. You're right, this is a unique sort of case."

Tom's father gave a quick nod, and smiled broadly. It was easy to see that Tom was almost a duplicate of his father in ~~almost~~ all respects. "Thank you."

"Now then," Hackner began, once again picking up ^{the} ~~his~~ ballpoint pen from his desk, "could you give me a description of your son..."

---CHAPTER EIGHT---

Darkness. Grayness. The boy knew that his eyes were open, and he could hear something even above the loud buzzing in his ears, but yet there was no ability to see. There was no feeling in his body. He was merely a head floating aimlessly through limbo, depersonified; with no torso or legs attached. The gray curtain covering his eyes was elaborately decorated with multi-colored sequens which pulsated ~~in~~ foward and back, making him dizzy. Some jaw muscles which were detached from any body flexed in an attempt to make a mouth form words which would not come out. Decker was nearby. He couldn't see him, and he couldn't hear him, but yet he still knew ~~that~~ he was standing very near. Intuition, maybe. No, it was more than that. It was a feeling; something cold and hard.

Tom blinked his eyes conciously several times, but still the curtain over his face would not open. He realized that his hearing was slowly coming back to him as he heard the sound of metal sliding against metal--a gun bolt. Oh dear God, he is here, ~~xx~~ he thought. The first thing the youth felt as he once again reached a state of consciousness was the cold barrel of Decker's rifle pressing into the soft underside of his chin. It hurt, but he did not have the power or the ability to yell. There was something else, too, that he could hear. It was sort of pulsating in an eerie way. He recognized it and yet the connection between his senses and his mind had been mysteriously severed, preventing him from making an identification. Laughter? Laughter! Consciousness was now coming back to him all too quickly. He was remembering the night before

with all its terrors and violence. He remembered the crazed look in the old man's eyes. The hole in his hand was once again beginning to ache and throb. Like ripples in water ~~Tom's eyes~~ the fog in Tom's eyes began to thin out, and the blurred vision of an old man with disheveled white hair danced before him. The image was awfully close, and seemed to be leaning way back. Of course. He was laughing.

Tom could see that Decker was yelling at him and he strained to hear the words. "Wake up!" he was yelling. "Wake up! I didn't hit you that hard. C'mon now. There you go. I've got you now, eh, Boy?" He pressed the barrel even harder into the boy's neck. It hurt badly. He laughed again. "Why God damn my soul, boy, I seen elephants that were harder to track than you are! Y'know somethin'? I ain't been more than ten feet away from you all the time, and I was damn near next to you each time you stopped. I was even close enough to tell that you never took the safety off that rifle I give you."

The youth closed his eyes as if to wish the crazy man away, but still he stayed. Tom could feel his half-naked body trembling with fear. Somewhere, from deep down within his soul he was making an effort to prevent himself from showing any kind of fear. Be brave, he told himself, don't give him the satisfaction of seeing you break. But still he shook. He suddenly ~~xxx~~ wished that he had not taken off his shirt and undershirt to wrap his hand, but instead that he had kept them on, so at least then he would be neat. Scenes of all the television shows and movies in which the star got himself into a similar situation raced through his mind. They were almost always in a suit and tie when someone pulled a gun on them. It looked better; it somehow made their predicament

seem more honorable. He felt that he should cover up or something. ^{should} That he/somehow hide from the old man/^{the fact} that his scare tactics had been so successful. He was embarrassed by his bloody and broken condition. Dried blood seemed to be everywhere on his body, and where it wasn't, there was a thick crust of dirt. He realized ~~a~~ even at the time that it was strange that he should be so concerned about neatness when his life was on the line, but ~~that~~ knowledge did not dilute his feelings of embarrassment in the slightest.

"Why doesn't he just go away and leave me alone?"

Old Man Decker's happy and jovial mood suddenly took a turn for the worse; he was becoming angry. "But I'm telling you right now, boy, that I'm getting tired of this game, and I'm gonna put an end to it." Breathing heavily through his mouth, he was making a disgusting slurping sound through an over-abundance of saliva.

"I'm gonna kill you."

All of his fears ~~in~~ which had~~xx~~ been lying silent within him ^{the boy} suddenly came forward with unbelievable reality with those last four words of the old man. Good God, he was serious about all of this! For some reason, until this moment, Tom had been able to console himself with the one possibility that this insanity that the old man was exhibiting would not go until the last, final moment. He had kept convincing himself that he would get some sort of reprieve at the last moment. But it did not come; or so he thought. Without a word, and not permitting the tears that wanted so badly to flow to do so, The youth took a deep breath and settled himself down into the soft, wet earth, and awaited the bullet that would douse out his life as water puts out a roaring fire. With incredible speed, all of the fun time that he had had during his sixteen years flashed through his mind, mercifully blocking out the present

for an all too valuable few seconds. Memories of his father and mother, and all of the good times that they had had together flashed by with crisp, sharp detail. He saw the faces of people who he hadn't thought about for years, and he could even remember the sound of their voices. For a brief second, he remembered the English composition that would be due in two days--or is it three? What day is it today, anyway? Saturday? No, Sunday. Jesus it's been a long time. He was even a little worried about that paper. He hadn't started it yet. He remembered the face of his orthodontist looking down upon him as he was removing the braces that had been on the boy's teeth for three years, and the feeling of triumph he experienced when he first saw the newly corrected white teeth in the mirror for the first time ~~once again~~ almost made him smile as he recalled.

The old man was still speaking, and no matter how hard Tom tried not to listen, the words creeped into his hearing. Unknown to the youth, the expression on his face was one of much fear; he looked exactly the way that he didn't want to. His lips were pursed tightly together, and he was wincing in anticipation of what was to come. In his mind, he had prepared himself for, and was almost looking forward to the shot which would put an end to his life and this whole nightmarish ordeal. For Christ's sake just get it over with, he thought. Will it hurt, he wondered. Not for long, anyway. What's taking him so long?

"But don't fret none now, boy," Decker continued, still making that repulsive slurping sound. "It won't be now--that wouldn't be sporting. But you listen to me good," He poked Tom's chin again with the rifle. "The next time I shoot at you, I won't miss. I can guarantee that for sure. First I'll get you in the belly.

Then maybe I'll aim at your legs, or even a little higher, if you know what I mean." He laughed that cackling laugh that Tom had been dreading. "Then I'll walk up to you, put the gun against your head, and blow your brains out, you little thief. I'm serious, too. And if you don't believe me, just wait a little while; you'll see that I don't kid around about things like this. And remember, I'll be watching you all the time." [As suddenly as he had appeared, Decker was gone. The laughter had stopped, and the birds were once again beginning to sing. All was quiet and peacefull with the exception of the frightened wreck of a boy who slowly rolled over on his stomach and began to trebleⁿ more than ever before. He could no longer stop the tears.

---CHAPTER NINE---

Tom was sobbing convulsively; the sobs shook him from within. He was crying from a combination of fear, relief, dread, and an overpowering feeling of hopelessness. He wished so badly that he could be at home now. ~~xxxxxx~~ A feeling of hatred like he had never before felt had risen inside of him, completely taking over and dominating his body.

"A game..." the boy mumbled between sobs, "He thinks that all this is a game. What did I do? Why is he doing all this to me. He can't be that mad about me breaking into his house." A recognition of the degree of hopelessness of his predicament came upon him, and the sobbing started up again, this time worse than ever before. The walls of his stomach, and his diaphragm contracted violently, and he had a hard time gaining his breath ~~xxx~~ amidst the hiccups. The emotional strain of the last few hours came to a head right then, putting him on the edge of a total breakdown. He was nauseous, but he would not allow himself to ~~throw up~~ ^{VOMIT}.

After a while, he finally got control of himself, and managed to settle himself down to the point where he was no longer crying. As he brought himself slowly to his feet, he held his shattered hand close to his ~~body~~ dirty and sweaty body. It seemed to be hurting him more than it was before. He looked at ~~it~~ His hand quickly by bringing it up close to his face to make sure that it was not bleeding again. It was not. Was his vision going, or had his eyes just been closed for too long, leaving them unable to adjust to the light quickly? He determined that it was the latter.

He clumsily rose completely to his feet, and stood ^{STILL} there for a little while until he was sure he could maintain his balance. As he stood there, he could feel his left cheek swelling where the old man's rifle butt had landed. At least it wasn't bleeding. He thought at that moment that if he saw any more blood that day, he would certainly get sick. As he staggered over to the thicket where his rifle landed, his booted feet seemed to be constantly tangled with each other, his ankles very unsteady because of the two-inch heels. What was at one time almost a patent-leather-like finish on his shoes, ^{WHICH HAD BEEN BUFFED TO A HIGH SHINE} had been reduced to a cloudy, dusty gray in color, with deep gashes taken out of the leather. The plastic heels were even chipped and broken in some places from landing crookedly on sharp rocks which seemed to search out the boy's feet.

If it was not for the fact that the grass was all disturbed, Tom would probably never have found his rifle in the thick foliage. Trying as best he could to keep his left hand elevated, he leaned over and picked up the remains of the gun. As he examined it carefully, he found himself amazed at the destruction caused by a ^{SMALL} mere .30 calibre bullet. The object that he was holding in his ^{HAND} only slightly resembled a rifle, but instead looked like an over-sized pistol. The stock was almost entirely shot away, and evil-looking white splinters of wood extended in all directions, reminding Tom of the bared teeth of some viscious pre-historic monster. He found himself suddenly thankful that his left hand had not been shot off entirely. The weapon was much lighter than it was before; at least that's good. There it was. He had found the small, unlabeled safety lever on the side of the breech, and with a very deliberate movement he turned it ninety degrees to the left. "There,"

he said, with a distinct note of satisfaction in his voice, "I've taken care of that. Now the next time that bastard comes around..." He smiled. But it was not his natural smile. It was as though he was trying to impress some invisible audience in front of him.

There was a sound.

Without at first being aware of what he was doing, the boy charged headlong into the thickness of the woods. He was running again. His legs had once again been taken over by that strange power that kept possessing him. He noticed, however, that each time he started running, he was considerably slower than the time before. His feet were not coming as far off the ground. Fear was in the driver's seat, controlling all of his reactions, and all of his emotions. Again the only thought in his mind, and his only reason for being on earth had been to save himself from Decker. As he was running, all of this went through his mind, and he stopped abruptly. Sweat was running in river from both of his armpits, and down his sides, leaving white stripes through the layer of dirt ~~xxxxx~~ over his ribs, before finally soaking into the waist band of his trousers, ^{causing the denim to} ~~xxxxxxkxxxxxxkxxxx~~ turn dark blue.

"Wait a minute," he said aloud to himself, panting, his whole body moving up and down with each breath he took. "You're doing this all wrong, kiddo. You're making all of this too easy for that son-of-a-bitch. He's having too much fun at your expence. You're running scared, and that's exactly what he wants you to do." He shook his head sharply, as if realizing that he had come up with the only way that he could survive through this nightmare. "Well no more. No siree. If he's gonna kill me, then by damn, he's gonna have to work at it." He resolved, in that moment, to use all of the little knowledge he had about the woods to confuse the old man.

"If you want to make this all a game, you crazy old man, then by God I'll do all I can to mess up the game plan."

A sudden air of confidence swept ~~down~~ over him. In his mind, for the first time, he had given himself almost as good a chance to survive as he had previously given the old man to kill him. He was no longer running; the ability to reason had returned, and he was now finding himself thinking about--even planning--all of his actions before he did them. His fear of death, and the old man had dissolved away to a slight, barely noticable discomfort in the pit of his stomach, which he blocked out of his mind. He re-adjusted the half-destroyed rifle's position in his hand so that the index finger of his right hand was looped tightly around the trigger, instead of being wrapped uselessly around the barrel. He was ready to react to the first glimpse ~~of~~ he received of Decker. As he walked on, he was watching his feet carefully, ~~and~~ trying as best he could to stay on hard ground and rocks, so as not to leave many tracks for the old man to practice his hunting skills on. He tried to walk on the balls of his feet so that if ~~decker~~ the hunter did find some tracks, he would have a difficult time trying to figure out the direction in which his prey was traveling.

For just a short moment, the boy relaxed his left arm from its upright position, and let it swing downwards, allowing blood to rush into all of the veins and capillaries of his ruined extremity. Pain shot all the way up to his neck from the wound, and he stiffened rigidly. His countenance became twisted with pain as he quickly raised his hand again. The fingers were now three times their normal thickness, and they were all purplish-green. His dirty fingernails were almost completely hidden under the swollen flesh surrounding them. It felt as though all the ^{joints} ~~xxxxx~~ had grown

together. The now coagulated blood which had soaked the bandage when it was first put on now formed a reddish brown crust on the ~~xxxxxx~~ cotton, through which some sort of clear liquid was leaking, and dripping down Tom's tanned, dirty arm. The hole itself felt very dry and scabby; much like a bad sunburn. He was worried about that hand. It looked alot worse now than it did when it frist happened. The wound was badly infected and he knew it--very badly infected. Would they amputate? Oh God, wouldn't that be grose; to have ~~one~~ of those ugly hook things that they train you to use? He'd never be able to any of the things that he liked to do ever again. Baseball. Football. They'd all be imposibe for him to participate in if he became a cripple. Especially football. Hell, that would be like letting someone ^{SLAY} with a knife ~~slay~~. And what about girls? He could never get married. Can't you see a girl dancing with someone when she has to hold on to a metal claw, or if not that, then a red and shriveled stump of flesh? Grose!

TRANS. ← Most of his self-pity had left him now that he was thinking differently about his plight. That bastard was not going to get him now. He was going to see the old man bleed--watch him die. One bullet should be enough. Hell, if he hit him right, a thirty calibre slug could practically blow him in two. Yes sir. He's had it now. ^{He'd} ~~He'd~~ get him good. There was no way that anyone would see Tom Stone grovel again. No way.

---CHAPTER TEN---

(WHOLE CHAPTER HAPPENS TOO QUICKLY)

Business was going just as it always was at the Police Station. In the unnatural white fluorescent lighting everyone at their desks and typewriters looked as though blood was no longer circulating through their veins, their faces and hands palidly absent of color. The clatter of the keys of hundreds of typewriters striking the paper lodged tightly in the carriages filled the huge barn of an office with deafening noise. Men and women alike wandered in and out and from desk to desk very busily, the grips of their pistols sticking ominously out of the tops of their holsters.

In one corner of this madhouse, in a glass-enclosed office, a fat detective sat behind his desk talking to two other men. "Look, Lieutenant," one of the two/other men began, "we've made a couple of quick phone calls, and I can tell you right now there just isn't a case to work on. This kid just disappeared into nowhere. Not only can we not find out about where he was last night, but we don't know where he wanted to go. What we do know is only two things: number one, we know that he was supposed to be staying over at his friend's house, and number two, we know that he was out of the car before it crashed, ~~because~~ ^{TELL US} the experts ~~say~~ that the car the kids were in exploded on impact, and there was no escape because all the doors were hopelessly jammed and there were no openings big enough for a sixteen-year-old to be thrown ~~from~~ ^{THROUGH}. In fact, they had to use blow torches to get the other two out after the ~~fix~~ fire."

The Lieutenant leaned forward and rested his elbows on his desk, his fat belly flowing over the edge of his belt, and touching his bulging abdomen. He grimaced a little and then sat up straight again, reaching beneath his suit coat to remove the small clip-on holster for his snub-nosed revolver which was digging into his side. He opened the top right hand drawer of his desk and placed the weapon inside. "Well, I'll tell you, guys," he began, leaning forward once again, "I never really ~~did~~ think that anything would come of this investigation. There's nothing harder in this world to find than a runaway teen-ager who doesn't want to be found, and who hasn't done anything to break the law." He stopped for a moment and looked down at his desk, wiping the back of his neck with a not-so-white handkerchief. He sighed. "But I did promise this Stone dude that I'd do all I could to find his kid, so let's work on it a little longer."

"But Lieutenant," one of the men in front of the desk complained, "We've been on this for the last five hours, and we can't even give you the name of a friend who has seen him in the last couple of days."

"C'mon, let the Child Welfare people take care of this case, and let us do something usefull. Then if they find out that he ^(THE OTHER MAN) did something illegal, then we'll be more than happy to take the case. But not now."

Hackner was determined to keep his promise to the boy's father. He smiled. "Nice try fellas, but no chance. The case is still yours. What the hell, in five hours, you couldn't possibly have covered all of the possible leads. Ask all of the people who live even remotely close to where the accident took place if they saw anyone who fits the kid's description leaving the scene of the fire. If that doesn't do anything then go to each of his teachers

xxxxxxx

for a character analysis, and if they have any idea where he might go. Hell, like I said, there are millions of places where you haven't looked. Have you **GONE TO ANY OF THOSE?"**

The other two shook their heads. "No, we haven't looked in any of those places---except we did ask a couple of neighbors if they saw anyone leaving the scene. All their answers were negative. They said that with the speed that that car was going, there was no way in this world that any one could have survived. But I suppose we could check into a couple more, though. It's just that of all the cases being worked on in the department, how'd we get stuck with a ringer like this one?"

The lieutenant laughed. "It's called the luck of the draw. I can honestly see your point, though. I'd be pissed, too, if somebody gave me an assignment like this one. But it is yours, and there's nothing that can change that, so I strongly suggest that you get to work." **(**Grunting and sighing their disapproval the two

officers got up to leave. As they were walking out the door, the fat man called after them. "Incidentally, Why don't you check out

the old man that lives in the mansion up that road off of Main Street
--Decker, I think his name is, or something like that. **ANYWAY, I THOUGHT I SAW SOME SIGNS UP THE ROAD TO HIS HOUSE.**
he might know something. He probably doesn't, but he might."

MAYBE
The two men nodded and left the office, closing the door behind them.

---CHAPTER ELEVEN---

Inspector Peterson's midnight blue LTD turned slowly ^{from Main Street} onto the narrow, unmarked and unidentified road which led to the residence of Niles Decker, the old man who lived in the large mansion which sat in the middle of the woods, about twenty miles outside of the town. A spray of gravel and sand which had accumulated at the point where the two roads met was thrown up against the bottom of the car, making a loud rattling sound which went unnoticed by the two men ~~inside~~ inside. *THE LIEUTENANT WAS RIGHT. WHO EVER TOLD THAT CORNER NOT TOO LONG AGO WAS DEFINITELY GOING MUCH TOO FAST. BLACK SKIN MARKS MADE A WIDE ARC ONTO MAIN STREET.*

The man in the right-hand seat looked casually at his watch and frowned. It was three-thirty already. He really didn't feel like conducting an investigation at this hour. Hell, he was supposed to be quitting for the day and going home in an hour and a half. He didn't see how he could possibly be through with questioning the rich old man and with filling out his report on the interview back at the station in ~~that~~ ^{that} short time. Well, he'd just have to give Joni a call and tell her that he'd be picking her up a little bit later than he had suspected for their date--again.

Both of the occupants of the car shifted in their seats rather stiffly. It had been quite a while since they last left the Lieutenant at the station, and they had been on the run ever since--mostly sitting in the car. They were happy that the car they were in had air conditioning. "You know," Peterson's partner, Herb Miles began, "for starting out to be so cool this morning, it sure has gotten hot. It must be close to ninety. Hell, and I thought that we were through with the hot weather for this

year." ~~This was the first time that~~ Everyone had welcomed the brief reprieve from the sweltering heat of several days before, but the heat had returned in all its glory. It was strange, Miles thought, how you can tell when it's a hot day just by the tempers of the people you come in contact with during the day. Everyone's pissed.

"Well," Peterson said, " the weather man on the news ~~xxx~~ this morning said that a cold front is gonna move into the area day after tomorrow. He says it'll bring some rain, but at least we won't have to sweat to death."

As they drove down the seemingly endless road, it seem almost to be dusk, the canopy of leaves which extended over the road selfishly refusing to let any of the bright sunlight of midday pass through. The leaves were so thick that when one of the Inspectors tried to get some music on the radio, all he got was static. "Boy, talk about living way out in the boonies."

"Would you tell me what the hell this kid was supposed to have done? I can see him staggering into the woods for twenty some odd miles for help after the accident, when there are bunches of houses right in front of where they cracked up. Right."

"It doesn't sound too very plausible, does it?" Peterson admitted, "but the Lieutenant said that he wanted us to check this old dude out, so that's what we're doing. We might as well. After all, we're closer to the old man's house now that we are to town." *J.R.S.*

Inspector Miles ~~was~~ was the only one who unconsciously felt the absence of any animals or animal sounds as they traveled down the road. It wasn't the kind of absence that could be justified by the fact that the car windows were closed and the

air-conditioning ^{was} being on--it was something much more unnatural than that. It made him feel a little strange inside. In a twenty-mile expanse of forest, you should think that you'd at least see a deer or a chipmunk, or something, but they didn't. Perhaps it was an omen of some sort to someone; maybe, ^{involving} a young boy of sixteen. But whatever it was that caused it, the ^{DISCOMFORT} ~~uncomfort-~~ableness it caused in the pit of his stomach mysteriously convinced him that they should definitely continue down the road to the old man's house to talk with him. It somehow seemed very important to him.

As the slow trip down the road progressed, the driver's foot was pushing the accelerator further and further toward the floorboard, the car's wheels leaving a steadily larger wake of dust behind the vehicle which disappeared slowly into the nothingness of fresh air, long after the car had passed. Why would anyone want to live that far away from civilization, they wondered.

At last they saw it.

The Decker mansion was much larger than either of the officers had expected. As they approached the spot in front of the house where, the night before another carload of people had stopped, Inspector Miles grabbed his partner's arm. "Stop!" He almost shouted the words. Peterson immediately responded by stomping heavily on the brake, bringing the car to a quick, sliding halt.

"What is it?" the other shouted angrily.

"Look."

Miles was pointing at a very strange sight for an out-of-the-way place such as where they were. The ~~dust~~ dirt in front of the long sidewalk that led to the house had a jumbled array of tire tracks in it, as though someone spun their wheels in an effort

to leave in very much of a hurry.

As they opened their doors to get out of the car to look at the tracks, the heat which they had forgotten about in the coolness of the car wafted over them, taking their breath away slightly. Well, they say the weather is fickle--they certainly were right. As soon as he felt the heat, Peterson responded by pulling at his tie with both hands until the knot was undone, and he dropped the tie onto the front seat. Seeing this, Miles thought that it was a good idea, and he did the same.

"Would you believe it was down into the forties last night?"

As they approached the tracks, they both caught ^{SIGHT} of a hubcap laying over in a ditch at the side of the road. Miles picked it up curiously out of the dirt, and looked questioningly up at his partner. "What kind of car were those kids that were killed last night driving?"

Peterson shrugged. "A ~~Chrysler~~ ^{FORD}, I think, why?"

The other man smiled broadly and said, "It looks like we're on the right track--look." He turned the hubcap so that the front was facing his partner. Inspector Peterson pinched his lower lip pensively as he stared at the emblem ~~of a car~~ on the cap. It was from a ~~Chrysler~~ ^{MUSTANG - A FORD MUSTANG.}

ONE WITH THE DO-BOY
"NOT THE TRICKY DO-BOY"
WE TALK ABOUT THE TRICKY

--CHAPTER TWELVE--

The two Inspectors looked at each other strangely. The case suddenly taken a whole new aspect. "I wonder if it's just a coincidence," Peterson said quietly, under his breath. The other man shrugged and motioned with his head towards the house.

"Let's go talk with the old man. Maybe he can tell us something about why they left so quickly, whoever they were."

A cloud mercifully passed in front of the sun, momentarily spreading a cool shade over everything. Miles was pensively pursing his lips and rubbing the back of his neck as he tried to come up with some possible reason why a group of boys would come out to a place like Decker's and then leave so quickly. Whatever it was, it certainly scared them.

As they approached the house, both men were rather amazed that a man of Decker's age could keep the outside of his place so beautiful. The symmetry of the shrubs on either side of the front door was flawless, and the variety of colors of the flowers was perfectly arranged. The only detractor to the entire lawn was the fish pond which sat in the middle of the closely cropped grass which had a layer of green scum floating on the surface.

At last they were standing outside the front door, and Peterson poked his stiffen forefinger into the button on the doorjam, and from inside they heard the elaborate ring of an expensive doorbell. They waited for a moment, and, having received no answer, he rung it again. Still, there was no answer. "Let's

try around back."

As they rounded the front corner of the house, they both took curious note of an ornate ^{pattern} ~~xxxxx~~ of matted grass, which showed that ~~xxxxx~~ someone had been walking through it not too long ago.

The lawn-grooming obviously had stopped at the front yard, for in the side and back yards the grass reached to their shins, giving Inspector Peterson an uncomfortable, itching sensation as he walked through it. ~~Thezzfeetprntszszshowszbzszndzazdzazbz~~

Following the tracks in the grass, the two policemen were led around to ^{a window in the} back of the house, where they saw some things which interested them even more.

Strewn about the grass for several yards in all directions were pieces of broken wood and glass which obviously came from the ragged hole in the side of the wall where there was once a window. Miles curiously ran his hand along a huge indentation in the side of the window and then looked at his palm--it was red with powdered brick. It appeared as though someone had shot the hole the wall just recently, for ~~it~~ was not at all weather-worn; in fact, it was still dusty. He was just about to call his partner's attention to his discovery when he saw that he was already stooping down picking up small pieces of brick from among the glass and examining it carefully.

Peterson looked up and said, "Whatever it was that hit this sure had a hell of a lot power behind it. Look, it sent pieces flying clear across the yard."

"Hey, man," Miles began, "This case is beginning ~~to~~ to get pretty hot. Why don't we call the Lieutenant and get some others out here to help. It looks to me that that wall has been shot up."

Scratching his head, Peterson sighed and stood up. "Well, if we find any other evidence that there was some shooting here, then we'll give him a call, but in ~~the~~ ~~the~~ mood he's in today, I don't think we should say anything at all until we're damn sure that we're right. You know what I mean?"

The other ~~nodded~~ abruptly, but his mind was obviously on ~~xx~~ something which he had just spotted ~~xxxxxx~~ on the ground beneath the window. In the dirt there ~~was~~ ^{were} the prints of ~~a~~ booted feet, and next to that, there were some other prints from ordinary shoes. The bootprints were facing in two directions: ~~xxx~~ ^{one set} was pointed towards the house, and another set was facing away from the house. "It looks like we might have a burglary on our hands, George," he ~~said~~.

HOW DOES HE KNOW?

"How's that?"

"Look here. Somebody who looks like he was wearing a pair of boots entered the house and exited it through this window."

"Uh-oh," Peterson interrupted, "the report the Lieutenant gave us said that the ~~kid~~ Stone kid was wearing boots when he disappeared. Plus, I'm sure I remember seeing a print just like that right by where the car took off out in front. I bet they're all the same people."

"Yeah, well, whoever it was that came here was either chasing or being chased by somebody else when he left. You see those other prints around there? That's the first place they appear--only one person tramped through the grass out ~~there~~, so they have to belong to some one who was inside when the other guy came in." He chuckled. "And judging from the condition of that window, when they took off after each other, they were in one hell of a hurry."

On Miles' suggestion, the two men climbed through the open window to check out the inside of the house for anything strange. As they climbed through the window, both of the officers were carefull not to let any of their exposed skin touch any of the lingering broken glass that was still laying ~~xx~~ all ~~xxxx~~ over the sill and on the carpeting inside. It was easy for them to surmize that they were standing in the den to the old man's house, because of the gaudy hunting trophies on the walls, and the huge desk and accessories which was the major item in the room. "IS anybody here?" Peterson shouted. "This is the Police!" He waited a moment and then shouted again, "Is anybody home?" Again no one answered.

As they looked about the room, they frowned at its ~~very~~ messy condition. Without saying anything to each other, they split up, Miles taking the left side of the room, and Peterson taking the right side. Across one of the sofas which sat back-to-back in the middle of the room were three muddy footprints which matched those ~~xxxxxx~~ on the ground outside of the window. In the back of the room was the wine cabinet which was wide open with the upper right-hand corner completely shattered, ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ and white where the varnished wood was torn away in splinters which were laying all over the floor. On top of the cabinet was an old bottle of wine. Taking out his handkerchief, Miles picked up the remains of a broken flashlight from the floor, and looked at it. "Well, most of whatever happened here last night happened right here in this room," he said. "And it sure looks to me that there was an attempted burglary, which was stopped in the process--and somebody did a hell of a lot of shooting."

"I'm beginning to think you're right, Herb. That mess on the wine cabinet was definitely made by a bullet. And look at the ceiling over here." He pointed at a bullet hole in the plaster above his head. "There's no doubt that that came from a gun. Looks like a .30 calibre. Look how the chair here has been knocked over. There was definitely a struggle here, ^{BUT} ~~and~~ for all the shooting, they didn't hit much--at least there isn't any blood anywhere."

Inspector Miles uncomfortably felt his pistol beneath his coat to make sure to himself that it was still there and then proceeded carefully out into the main entryway, just outside the den. The ~~xxxx~~ windows in the top halves of the double doors spilled eight squares of sunlight onto the floor of the hallway. Directly across from the entrance to the den, was the doorway which led to a very formal living room, through which the Inspectors could see expensive furniture which again showed that Decker had good taste in many areas. Directly across from the front door was a breathtakingly beautiful staircase which went straight up for a distance and then separated in two ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ winding staircases, both of which led up to the same second floor, the hallway of which could be seen from the entryway through a guardrail which ran its length.

Meticulously checking each room throughout the house, the ~~x~~ inspectors found that nothing was so much as out of place in any of the rooms; except for the den. As they were walking down the stairs together after having checked the second floor, they noticed the final link in the puzzle they had been trying to piece together inside the house; a gun case which stood on the right wall

of the entryway was full of rifles, which were arranged so that the barrels of the guns were horizontal, and they were stacked one on top of the other. What interested the two policemen were the two vacant spots in the rack where there had been two rifles which were no longer present.

"That tears it," Peterson said, "There are two people wandering around somewhere armed to the teeth. Now we've got to call the Lieutenant."

Miles nodded pensively, and then his face lit up with an idea. "Of course. I've got it!"

"Got what?"

"A hypothesis." The inspector was speaking excitedly. "Try this: A car full of kids--the Stone kid, plus those boys that were killed in the crash last night--pulled up here last night to pull a heist. Now for some reason, only the Stone kid came in around the side of the house, making the single set of tracks out side. ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ Since it's no secret that this Decker fellow is a big game hunter, he was most likely sent in to get one of the guns, and he went directly to finding out where the gun closet was. After he found that, he probably decided to look around the inside of the den on his way out again.

"Now this is where things started going wrong." As Miles was giving his explanation, he began walking around, re-enacting everything he thought happened. "As he was stooped down looking through the wine cabinet here, Decker walks in and fires at him with one of the other guns from the closet out in the hall. Panicked, the kid whirls around and fires a wild shot into the ceiling there, and takes off, running across the sofa over there and through the window--the closed window. As he reaches the

window, though, the old man takes another shot at him, which misses, but tears that big chunk out of the sill.

"Now once outside, the kid probably heads back towards the car he came in, but the other two kids inside heard the shots and they take off like bats outta hell, leaving their friend high and dry. Now judging from the other set of tracks outside of the window, Decker was right on the kid's heels, ~~xxxxxx~~ ~~xxxx~~ and having nothing else to do, the Stone kid took off into the woods with the old man right on his tail..... Well, what do you think?"

Peterson was pulling at his lower lip, and nodding slightly as he thought over the explanation. He pointed his forefinger into the air thoughtfully and said, "Pretty good, but I have a couple of questions; First, if the kid went to the gun closet first, then how come there are no footprints in the hall, but there are some on the sofa which he put there as he left?"

Miles shrugged and smiled. "Easy, look. The floor out there in the hallway is hard tile. If I were him, trying to steal something without waking anybody up, I sure would take off my hard boots before making any racket walking across a hard floor. Wouldn't you?"

The other officer nodded his concession. "Secondly," he said, "Where does that leave the Stone kid, and Decker?"

Miles sighed. "I sorta thought you could figure that out by yourself. Okay, look. We know that the boy hasn't been home, and we know the same about Decker. So that means that they're both still out there in the woods someplace, Right?"

Again Peterson nodded, and then added a little of his own to the hypothesis. "And the other kids who were killed in the crash

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last night were probably going so fast because they were trying to get help--in fact, they were headed in the direction of the station when it happened."

Miles smiled broadly and extended both arms out towards his partner. "Right. Now you've got it. Pretty good, huh?"

"Yessir, I think you hit the nail right on the head." He tapped the other man's shoulder. "C'mon, let's give the Lieutenant a quick call and then go back to the station and make a full report. They can send a couple of black-and-whites out here to conduct a search. There's nothing we can do here by ourselves."

As the inspectors climbed^{back}/out of the window, they were again cautious not to let any of the broken glass cut them.

--CHAPTER THIRTEEN--

Good God it was hot.

It was difficult for the boy to keep his balance walking ~~xxxx~~ on all the rocks that had gathered along the path he was travelling. He was at the base of two steep, ~~xx~~ tree-covered ~~xxxxxxx~~ hills which rose at forty-five-degree angles from each other. At the vertex of the two hills was a thin shallow ditch which flowed freely and deeply with water each time it rained heavily. It was also the same long ditch which served as the collection point for all rocks, pebbles, and dirt which came down from either hill. These were the same rocks which made walking such a difficult task for the boy in his almost dazed condition.

His lack of food for so many hours had long ago caused him to be overcome with nausea, and his lips were beginning to become cracked and his tongue swollen from going without water. His legs had become weights which had none of their youthfull strength. Sweat had soaked the waistban and back seam of his trousers so completely that the blue dye from the jeans was coloring whatever skin came in contact with it. At that moment, he looked very much like a boxer who had just lost a fight; he was in sort of a dazed stupor, and his left eye was little more than a swollen purple lump on his face as a result of the blow delivered by the butt of Decker's rifle.

Despite his physical condition, he cautiously scanned the slopes of both hills for a sign of the old man. Suddenly he stopped and

dropped to his right knee, looking around, presently awakened out of his stupor. He knew he saw something, but what was it? Where was it? Probably just a bird or something. No, wait! There it is again!--at the crest of the hill on the left. He still couldn't make it out--the sun got into his eyes when he looked at it.

Staying in a crouched position, he moved a little bit further up the hill, going from tree to tree, always staying under cover just in case. He saw it again for just a fraction of a second before it would disappear again behind a tree. Jesus Christ, it was Decker! He was roaming about the trees looking for something. The boy sat very still, waiting for a bullet to strike near him as it had happened so often during the past few hours. The eyes which he had closed in anticipation slowly opened. He looked back at the wispy-headed ~~xxxxxxx~~ figure which was silhouetted against the bright, yellow sun. Wait a minute! The old man didn't see him! He didn't know where he was! The boy couldn't believe it; he had actually lost him!

Tom felt jubilant in his discovery. He had really succeeded in illuding the madman! Wow! ~~xxxxxx~~

Decker was moving slowly across the top of the hill, peering intently through the thick underbrush ^{IN A CONCENTRATED SEARCH} for his prey. Always staying a little behind the old man, and always staying under cover, the boy followed from the base of the hill. As he was scooting cautiously between rocks and trees, always keeping the old man in sight, a clumsy leg brushed up against a hollybush which rustled loudly. Tom immediately dropped to his knees and froze, wincing as he accidentally jostled his ^{WOUNDED} ~~enlarged~~ hand. He didn't even breath. Decker had heard the noise.

Everything was happening in slow motion. He saw the old man standing there, not moving, obviously searching for the source of the noise he had just heard. The boy's thin, battered body was pressed close up against the tree which stood next to him. He was trembling, and the coldness he felt the night before returned to him. This is ridiculous, he thought, this is your chance! Stick it to him!

The rifle, which had almost become a part of him during the ordeal, seemed suddenly to become twice its normal weight. His gaze fell slowly to the gun, as though he had forgotten about it being in his hands, and then back to the old man on the hill. A smile crossed the youth's face, causing the accumulation of dirt around his nose and mouth to crack. Brown, coagulated blood^{dark brown} outlined his dirty yellow teeth. They almost looked crusty. His ~~xxx~~ smile was a frightening one, and his eyes burned with hatred for the old man. Now was the boy's chance to kill him and he was going to do it.

Being as silent as possible, Tom raised his gun to a level position, and wedged the barrel into the fork between an outward-growing branch and the trunk of the tree. It was secure there. He felt that it was almost lucky that the handgrip of his rifle had been shot apart; that way, he was able to have the source of support just inches away from the trigger--he could be much more accurate. There was a strange feeling of power within his being. The tables were ~~completely~~ turned. Now he was the one who was the aggressor. He had succeeded in making the old man make a fatal mistake; stepping out into the open. He knew better than to do something like that. It was odd, Tom thought,

that the old man was going to die because of a mistake that he never would have made if he had only been thinking, and he would probably never make again. But on the other hand he'd never have the chance. The youth chuckled.

Peering down the long barrel, Decker appeared so small, that his entire body was covered up by the small, nub of a forward sight at the muzzle. Just as he was about to pull the trigger, the boy stopped, and lifted his cheek from its resting place on what was left of the stock to check the safety. He wasn't going to make that mistake again. It was off.

The boy could see that the old man was looking directly at him. His heart was pounding furiously as he stared into the unexpected eyes of the old man. "He can't see you" he kept telling himself silently. "You're too well hidden." As he stared, frightened, the old man turned his head to another direction, assuring the boy that he had not yet found him.

As he cocked his head sideways again to rest his cheek on the stock of the gun so that he could take aim, the tendrils of the dirty brown mop on his head fell down into his eyes. As always, he responded without thinking, and angrily brushed them aside with his hand. ~~xxxxxxkxxx~~

Suddenly the old man straightened, detecting some movement in the bushes. He turned his emaciated face back in Tom's direction, bending slightly at the waist, and screwing up his countenance in careful scrutinization of the thick mass of green which stood between himself and the youth.

"You ~~xxxx~~ fool," Tom cursed himself, "He saw you!" His finger steadily tightened around the trigger, but he was too nervous; his vision kept fading into a thick fog which he had to blink away.

"Keep calm," he told himself. "You've only got one shot, so you've got to make it count." He was trembling. The extreme coldness he felt the night before had returned, and his whole body shook--but this time he was not quaking from fear, but rather from the excitement of finally having his chance at shooting Decker.

As Tom was just zeroing in on his target for a second time, the old man caught sight of the half-naked figure in the bushes. Decker's mouth dropped open momentarily ^{as he realized} that the boy was preparing to shoot, and he clattered for his rifle, tearing at the shiny bolt; pulling it back and cocking the weapon.

The youth's ~~s~~heart was racing furiously, and he once again blinked away the fog which was spoiling his aim. "You've got to keep calm." The bead sight on the tip of the barrel was just resting on the figure of the old man as Decker raised his own gun and prepared to shoot.

"NOW!" the youth screamed as he jerked his right index finger against the trigger. The rifle barked ~~it~~ its loud response as a yellow streak of flame jumped out of the bushes, propelling the bullet ^{to} ~~at~~ its mark. The old man was ~~lifted~~ slightly off of his feet ~~slightly~~ as the piece of steel with which he had provided his attacker ripped into his body, and ~~xxxxxx~~ ^{him} knocked backwards over the crest of the hill, ~~xxx~~ out of the ~~xxxx~~ ^{boy's} sight. As the bullet struck him, the old man fired a wild shot almost straight into the air, and as he fell, he never relinquished his grip on his gun.

His mouth open, and in the shape of a very weak smile, Tom slowly stood up straight. As he ~~slowly~~ ^{CAREFULLY} climbed out from among

the bushes and creepers, his finger was still pressed tightly against the trigger; as though he was afraid that if he were to let go, he would somehow undo what he had just done. In a daze, he walked on toward the crest of the hill, no longer feeling any pain from his many wounds. There was no room for any other thought or feeling in his mind than to make sure that Decker was dead.

Finally he reached the very top of the hill and looked down on his prey, totally unaware of the two policemen only three hundred yards away who had heard the shots, ¹⁻²⁻³⁻⁴⁻⁵⁻⁶⁻⁷ bringing their car to a screeching stop in the middle of the road.

--CHAPTER FOURTEEN--

Tom walked slowly down the hill, taking long, even strides, until he stood next to the old man who was doubled over, sitting on his haunches, ^{with} his knees on the ground. His right hand was clutching his belly, and there was a lot of blood running from somewhere, soaking his flannel shirt, and dripping into a small puddle on the ground. He was using his ~~right~~ left hand for support; keeping him from falling completely. His fingers were still closed tightly around the barrel of his rifle which was resting underneath him.

As he noticed the boy's presence, Decker tried to lift his gun, but his assailant visciouly ground the sharp corner of his plastic heel into his vulnerable fingers. The old man screamed in agony and fell forward onto his face as his only source of support was broken. With the same foot he used to crush ~~the~~ the old man's ^{FINGERS,} ~~extremities,~~ Tom rolled him over onto his back. His prey's palid features were contorted in pain and the now pleading old eyes stared pitifully up at his. Now that the old man was on his back, Tom could plainly see the ragged hole in his abdomen which was pumping thick redness onto the ground.

"You're a hell of a lot more harmless this way, aren't you?" Tom asked, with a smug grin on his face. Eyeing the gaping wound on the old man's belly, Tom said, "Looks like my bullet was faster than yours, doesn't it?" The smile on his face changed to a laugh. Decker continued staring up at the boy, not saying anything.

Wincing a little, ~~the~~ the youth bent down and picked up

the rifle which laid next to the old man, and put his own rifle down, ~~xxx~~ out of Decker's reach. Being careful not to use his ruined hand, the boy placed the muzzle of the rifle between his feet and held it ^{STEADY} there as he pulled at the bolt with his good hand, causing ^{THE} uselessly spent casing which was emptied into the air ^{BY} its owner ~~xxx~~ to pop out, and fall to the grass, making only a dull thump as it landed. The ^{pleading} ~~frigid~~ look in the prostrate man turned to fear as he realized what was about to happen, and he shifted his position nervously.

"Do you remember," Tom began as pushed the bolt home again, and arming the weapon he was holding, "when you told me how you were going to kill me? Remember the method you said you were going to use?" He raised the gun from its nose-down position with his right hand, and pointed it at the gray head before him.

"As I recall, you were going to shoot me in the belly, and then walk up to me, put your gun against my head, and then blow my brains out. Am I right?" Decker didn't move; he just continued staring at the bloody and sweaty wreck of a boy who was brandishing his weapon. "Well, I am right whether you say so or not.

And it just so happens," he continued, talking through his yellow smile, "that I got you first, so I'll just duplicate the ^{TAPPED HIS TEMPLE WITH HIS FOREFINGER, FEIGNING A CASSE OF MEMORY.} procedure. ~~After all,~~ I already got you in the belly, so what ^{DOES SEE, OH, THAT'S RIGHT, OF COURSE - STEP "B".} does that leave? ~~Why, step "B", of course.~~" He laughed and placed the barrel of his gun against Decker's forehead.

"Please..." the old man whimpered quietly as he tried to move away, but his efforts were fruitless. He continued staring directly into the boy's eyes.

Seconds earlier, ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ Inspectors Miles and Ptereson

came crashing through the underbrush and into the clearing where Tom and Decker were having their battle. The two officers quickly drew their guns as they watched a boy they had never seen before cock a high-powered rifle, and make a threat to kill an old man who was obviously disabled. "Hold it!" Miles yelled, "This is the Police."

But the boy with the gun either did not hear the call, or chose to ignore it, for he proceeded to place the muzzle against the old man's forehead. "Drop the Gun!" The inspector hollered again. "Drop it or I'll shoot!" The youth still did not heed the warnings he received, so the inspector was forced to fire his own weapon in order to save the life of a helpless old man.

Tom heard the shot at the exact instant he felt a crushing blow to the side of his ribcage which spun him ninety degrees; so that he was looking straight at the two men who were standing in half-squat positions, holding their revolvers with both hands, aiming them in his direction. As he spun, he involuntarily pulled the trigger on the rifle in his hands, the bullet passing ~~just~~ between the two policemen who had just entered the scene.

The inspectors returned the fire.

The boy saw the small flames leap angrily from the mouths of the guns in the strangers' hands and he screamed. "No....!" As he was falling--forever falling in slow motion--the youth saw the fragments from his shattered head flying through the air in all different directions. There was a lot of pain somewhere in his body, but he couldn't tell where. In the eternity during which he was falling, he vaguely remembered two parents whom he loved very much, and a strange sort of feeling came over him as

the image of a skinny, wispy-headed figure passed quickly through his mind.

He had almost reached the ground when the world turned into a mass of thick darkness.

Returning their guns to their holsters, the two men walked up to the scene in the clearing. At first glance there was absolutely no doubt in either of the inspectors' minds that the young boy was dead. There was some thick stuff that was grayish in color laying around the empty shell of his head, and his eyes were frozen in their fixed deathly stare. "If only he didn't try to shoot back the second time," Peterson said, looking away from the corpse, "then we wouldn't have had to shoot him."

"It wouldn't have helped," an old voice grunted from the ground where the old man was laying. "That kid was crazy. He broke into my house last night, and when I tried to leave, he started shooting at me. He's been following me all night, trying to kill me. Luckily I was able to grab a gun on my way out, but even when I winged 'im there in his hand, it didn't slow him down a bit. Yessir, he was a real psycho."

Miles sighed heavily. "Well, he's not anymore." He forced himself to look away from the body. "How about you, sir, are you very badly hurt?"

Decker shrugged painfully. "Not too, I don't suppose."

The policemen carefully helped the old man up so that they could take him to their car where they could await an ambulance.

"By the way," the old man said as he dragged himself along, "my name is Niles Decker."

"We know that sir," Peterson said solemnly, "We know."

It wasn't far at all to the road where the car stood waiting.