

The Fairfield County Friday Night Gridiron Bonanza
by Adam Bertocci

The best part of someone died with Kiki Malone, but whoever that was, it wasn't Wade. It was a sad day that sunny Thursday when they laid the poor girl into God's earth, but Wade Robinson wasn't distraught. Though, he was willing to admit, he was kind of missing her.

Aaron Hobart was missing third period history, which he appreciated. He hadn't known Kiki (Katherine, actually, but if you knew her you'd know why she was a Kiki) all that well, but for all his flaws, he was an excellent come-with guy. He was more than happy to share in the community's grief as the Class of 1998 said goodbye to a life taken too soon. Aaron was ready to feel people's pain and to take the weight of the world onto his shoulders. He had signed the condolence book, and solemnly introduced himself to Mr. and Mrs. Malone and told them that Kiki had been a special presence in his life, and he had already grabbed three little sandwiches off the trays at the folding table set off to the side—there was no money for a reception and anyway what with the big weekend coming up the two places in the village large enough to hold such a thing had been booked since the year dot.

Wade was a respectful kid and well-liked by other people's parents, and he knew just how to kneel at the graveside without it seeming like a pose. Aaron stood behind him, hands folded except for a few awkward scratches at the back of his neck—his own, not Wade's. They were friends but not lovers, which quite nearly summed up Wade's relationship with Kiki as well.

The cheerleading squad had laid Kiki's button-up sweater and her red-and-white pom-poms at her final resting place, their mascara running as they shouldered noble duty in a neatly choreographed march that lacked their usual pep. Wade had removed that sweater in the back of his father's pickup truck once, in happier days, while the tempting breasts beneath were still alive and responsive to touch. He had declined to share that memory in his kind words to Mrs. Malone. Good kid. Very well-liked.

And so he knelt and waited, by a count in his head, at least two silent minutes beside the grave of Katherine Kelly Malone, Beloved Daughter and Friend, September 11, 1980 — October 11, 1997, "Aim for the stars."

"When I go," said Aaron, just for something to say, "I hope they shoot a movie in the graveyard some day and you can see my name." But just getting the day off from school wasn't going to distract him from the gravity of the subject at hand, and he added, "I'm sorry, buddy. I am."

He knew not to use the word 'really'. 'Really' always meant you didn't mean it.

"Don't be," mumbled Wade. "Look, I spoke to her more today than I did all this school year."

"I see people on TV get all upset because someone dies and they never had a chance to make things right," said Aaron, scrunching up his toes. "That ain't you."

"Your concern is touching," Wade replied, and he kissed two of his fingers, then pressed them to the 'A' in 'Katherine', carved in stone. Got up. Didn't brush the dirt from his pants; that would not be respectful. Clumps of Connecticut graveside soil would be his badge of honor until his mom next did the laundry. "I'd like to be cremated, myself."

"Hey that's great. Why you tellin' me this shit."

“Someone has to know.”

It was a terrible thing, losing a nice girl like Kiki, and didn't the senior class have enough to contend with, what with the stress of college applications and kids-these-days' hormones making them grow up too fast, too fast? The teachers kept the workload low and Principal Thibodeaux had held a little assembly on Tuesday to discuss a time for healing. Tommy Owen—that was her boyfriend—gave a speech, a “eulogism” as he'd called it. His eyes were red, even from tears.

Tommy, like Wade, was well-liked, but for different reasons; he was a football hero, and that was enough for a little place like Red Corners. He brought pride to a small-town America kind of place that was perfectly content to be the last vestige of small-town America in Fairfield County; the yuppies had taken over the rest of the joint, except for Bridgeport which many agreed was a suitable candidate for urban renewal. (Immigrants lived there.) His cock had been in Kiki's mouth, briefly, only minutes after the moon rose that fateful Saturday night, and there was at least a seventy percent chance it was the last cock ever to enter the deceased.

He was quite shaken, and impressed upon his schoolmates that life is precious and fleeting and we should, like Kiki so well, um, you know, lived life on, like, for the best. Poor Tommy. No one blamed him for being sad or incoherent. She had a very pretty little mouth, and he hadn't made much of an effort to drive her home after the party or anything like that. He could have at least snatched her keys and told her she should walk it off. He could have done a lot of things.

It was a very tastefully handled send-off, it was agreed, and so nice that it was a nice day so everyone could mourn without getting rained upon. Aaron's decent brown shoes were slung over his shoulder like sneakers over a telephone wire—“they still do that in for fun in these rural parts,” he'd said—and his own sneakers, which he'd had the foresight to bring, were on his feet as he and Wade walked up Litchfield Lane and into what passed for the center of town.

“I wonder what the last thing she thought about me was,” mumbled Wade, as they waited for the stoplight to change as a mere formality.

“You gotta bring it back to you, don'tcha,” was Aaron's response. “Last thing went through her mind was the speedometer. You aren't the type people throw curses on as their dying wish. Even her.”

“Hey, I treated her like a princess.”

“Yeah, Diana,” said Aaron, with a wicked leer.

No response.

“See, 'cause she died in a car crash, so—ah, forget it.”

Wade held his sport coat tightly around him. “I'm cold. You cold?”

“Only insofar as I feel it in my knee when it rains,” said Aaron. He cast an eye back, toward the church, to watch someone leave.

At some point during all this the light had turned green, and they had crossed, and progressed, and passed Elmer's Barber Shop. Old men with nothing to do but wait to die had declared Elmer's their hangout long ago, just as their fathers' generation had gone to Elmer's to wait to die, and associate with other old men, telling one last fishing story

(but, curiously, never actually getting one last haircut) before buying the proverbial farm while everyone else was selling their actual farms and getting the hell out of state.

The old farts at Elmer's weren't the type to follow what those damn kids got up to, but things seemed a little quieter; they knew someone had died in the safe small town, though they would be more likely to say "that little blonde girl, Bobby Malone's kid" than "Kiki", and to bring up the name "Katherine" would only trigger a confused and rambling story about once having a clear sniper shot at Katie Hepburn during the war.

A death only shakes up a small town when it concerns someone outside the Elmer's crowd. Last week Alvin Propus had died and no one was surprised. Even in a town the size of Red Corners, there was only so much emotion anyone had for one more corpse. And ol' Elmer had died already, long before. It had been April.

What excited both the old burnouts and the young fools on some shared, sad, visceral level was the first football game that Kiki wouldn't get to cheer for.

Red Corners was a small and unpretentious kind of place, and Fairfield North was not, and even the type of person who ditched social studies to attend a funeral of a girl they never cared about knew enough sociology to analyze the class warfare situation. The Red Corners Rebels (Fairfield County had been a key something-or-other in the Revolutionary War) weren't just a football team, they were the first line of defense against the specter of gentrification and/or an America lost. This is not to imply that Red Corners was stupid or backward; there was running water in every home and a functional CD player in the car that Kiki Malone died in.

No cows to speak of, no endless expanses of unthrilling corn. But a one-screen movie house that couldn't even get the *Return of the Jedi* Special Edition and an eight-mile drive to the nearest four-story building wasn't the stuff of the cosmopolitan lifestyle the kids saw on TV, and it wasn't likely that Red Corners was going to join the twentieth century in time for the twenty-first. There was some concern about how one was gonna keep them down on the farm now that they'd seen Hartford. Indeed, Kiki Malone was the one kid in the school guaranteed to stay in Red Corners in the years to come.

But the game against those damn Northies... that was the one chance a year to see the youth of Red Corners fight for its town. Chances were, the shopkeepers and parents and hangers-on who went to see that game had played for Red Corners back in their day, or were friends with someone who had.

The Fairfield North Falcons, of course, were only too eager to prove themselves against the Rebels; it wouldn't look good if the hicks showed them up, and no one was interested in preserving the ideals of the working-class hero.

"No, it's cold. You don't feel that?" Wade complained. He scrunched up his face.
"Don't make that face, it'll get stuck that way," was Aaron's reply. "It's just the wind. You wanna turn a corner?"

"No."

"We could totally turn a corner."

"What, we gonna hang out at the flower shop?"

"Hey, your last witness to a heterosexual lifestyle's been dead seventy-two hours. Fag."

This was pretty much the typical rhythm of their conversation, although Kiki's untimely death had given Aaron a whole new bin of tasteless humor to dig through. If only an actual faggot would have the courtesy to die, he'd be set for life.

The shape of the Robinson-Malone courtship had been this: by high school society standards, they were an acceptable fit for one another.

Wade was a quiet type and Kiki was carrying a few extra pounds around, though her somber black dress at her final viewing had proven very slimming.

(That was the thing about Kiki's body after the accident: the car was a wreck, but at least they got her out of it, so it wouldn't burn. She technically didn't die in the car crash. She'd been unconscious, but she was out of the car when she died. Wade wondered if that meant she thought she'd died in the car.)

(The hospital said the internal bleeding was horrific, she'd really been all busted up inside... it was worse in the parts you didn't see. That was common, they said. A nasty gash across her forehead had been concealed by a skillful makeup job by Mr. Lincoln at the funeral home. Mrs. Malone, who was a proud woman and rather pretty herself in a similar way, was adamant that people be able to view her daughter's face one last time.)

(That was the thing about Kiki: she had a very nice face. Not that there were any ugly girls on the cheerleading squad, for reasons of tradition, but that still allowed for ice queens and skinny little whores and whatever unholy uptight spawn of two hemophiliac cousins and the eighth circle of hell you could call Cassidy Dale-Walters. Kiki had what the magazines called open features, and she was always smiling at ya. Chunky locks of friendly blonde hair and big brown eyes full of fun. Generously proportioned feet and just a bit too tall to fit comfortably into her own body, which is probably why she let a few too many guys fit just as comfortably into same. Still, not a malicious bone in her, except once Frank Kennedy's, and she would have been a natural mother one day if her uterus hadn't caved in around the same time as her fender.)

Wade was not a passionate young man, and cautious in affairs of the heart since a blowup with Sandy Coogan earlier in the year, but in spring a young man's fancy turns to seeing Sandy Coogan's tongue go down Michael Towson's throat, and he put too much stock in justice to let that go without revenge. There was a little springtime dance a coupla towns over, and Wade decided to ask that nice indiscriminating cheerleader who'd been his partner for a presentation on the atom, and by the unsophisticated standards of Red Corners, that was enough to be considered dating. That may well have been how half the generation was conceived to begin with.

But what's past is past; Wade was a realist, and not about to ponder how to salvage a failed relationship, particularly when one party was dead. It is Thursday afternoon and Wade Robinson is the only person under the age of sixty-five in all of Fairfield County who is cold. Within hours the junior high school doors will open, and out will flood the sixth-grade girls, all cold, all crossing their arms in front of their bodies to make their forearms will block the wind, all refusing to wear anything that would cover their budding teenage bodies or fashionable clothes from the Gap or Westport; you never knew when a virile seventh-grader, halfway out of sexlessness and into the dark realms of what-now, might be looking on.

It is at this time that Wade utters a sound of temperature-related complaint that seems to contain several hissed consonants and growled vowels.

This is how Wade Robinson will remember the response:

“You can borrow my coat if you want,” says Aaron, “and I’ll just charge you twenty percent interest like a good Jew.”

This is how Aaron Hobart will remember the statement:

“Blah, blah, blah, whine, whine, whine.”

This is how Kiki Malone will remember the conversation:

“Jews don’t get cold,” Aaron explained with a grand gesture of his arm. “We stored up all the solar energy that beat down on us during our time as slaves in Egypt, so we could save on the heating bill later on.”

“I hate you,” replied Wade, and that was enough. “You goin’ back to school?”

“They won’t be expecting us to.”

Aaron knew those words would light a fire in Wade’s imagination. Wade was very anxious to conform to expectations.

“You wanna come over?” Aaron offered. “We might as well do something with the damn day.”

“For a change?”

No reply.

“How many people do ya think were at the funeral. From our class, I mean,” asked Wade.

“You don’t care,” said Aaron.

“How do you figure.”

“If you’d cared you woulda counted.” Beat. “Thirty-eight. I like to know these things.”

(That was a little less than half the senior class. Red Corners was small but still large enough that no one had to interact with anyone they didn’t want to.)

“The cheerleaders came,” said Wade, which was no great observation. “Football team too. All the football team. Our class, anyway. Didn’t count the underclassmen. Fuck ‘em if they can’t take a joke.”

(Red Corners was small but still large enough to turn out some mourners if a young person died unexpectedly. People to ask why.)

“Yeah, no, all those jerk-offs you figure would be there,” Aaron agreed. “Did you see, behind the church, the cheerleaders all hugging each other in a circle, all crying.”

(“That was awesome,” he murmured to himself, under his breath.)

“No sense doing a clique rundown,” Aaron continued. “This was a community event. Even the drama fags and the Asian kid showed up.”

(Red Corners was small but still large enough to have an Asian kid. His name was probably Liang.)

They were drawing close to the high school. Bouquets were propped up beside the school sign, and “RIP Katherine Malone Forever in our Hearts” was posted in big black marquee letters on one side. The other side still had the good sense to proclaim “Go Rebels!” After all, the game was coming up.

“I tell ya, I’d have guaranteed you this,” proclaimed the jollier of the pair. “A home game this year, and they’d had the date and time posted and stuff, I tell ya, I never would have guessed they’d have taken it down.”

“Aaron, will you shut up?”

It was the first time Wade had seemed genuinely upset about anything all week. Aaron was good enough a friend to notice and lazy enough a friend to comply rather than dig up a witty comeback.

“Sorry,” he said, a second late.

Wade sighed. “I need to stop in and get my shit.”

“What shit?”

“Just shit,” said Wade, and he head-gestured toward the school.

Aaron was a come-with guy.

The front door of Red Corners High opened up into a lobby that seemed overly eager to split off into corridors. A painting of some long-forgotten administrator stood in an easily-ignored display case off to the side. There were decorations a-plenty for the big game—banners reading “Beat North” in red marker, red and white streamers. They’d been up for a week and a half now. No text in here to honor Kiki’s passing. There was no committee for that, and people had college applications to consider.

Wade’s locker was at the end of a long row of the things, and one couldn’t get there without passing Kiki’s. A Mexican janitor was sweeping away a pile of notes and flowers left at the base of it. He seemed very apologetic as he did so.

“They gotta turn the heat up in here,” said Wade as he fumbled with his combination.

Aaron did not respond. He was watching the Mexican and the flowers, and thinking of the Day of the Dead, his largely-plagiarized presentation on which Señor Sherman had generously declared *estupendo*.

“You don’t feel that?”

“I’m fine in here,” Aaron mumbled.

Across the hall, a dark-haired fortysomething was teaching ceramics.

“What’s takin’ ya so long,” said Aaron.

“I’m having trouble with the lock,” was Wade’s response, and he stuck his hand in his armpit. “I wanna get my fleece.”

“Give me that,” said Aaron, and he pushed Wade aside and yanked hard on the lock. “This—ishn’t—an exact science. You get the tumblers lined up close—and then ya pull—”

Like the mouth of an angry God, the locker opened.

Wade yanked out his fleece, slid off his sport coat, donned the fleece—reacting as if it had been soaking in ice water, complete with a ‘whoosh’ as his breath slid between his teeth—and then threw on the sport coat over that.

“You look ridiculous,” said Aaron, and Wade could not work up the energy to smile. He nudged the door shut with his foot.

“I don’t feel so good,” he whispered.

At Aaron’s insistence, Wade stopped in to see the nurse. She had a New York accent and the face of a school nurse. It was apparent that he was not dying, unlike other

people one could mention, and she advised him just to take it easy. In truth, Nurse Millar was not a brilliant woman and her craft was largely one of statistics; she had forms to fill out and a nosebleed to attend to, and she had little knowledge of the diagnosis of mysterious chills with no perceivable physical basis in much.

Because Wade hadn't been anywhere cold, couldn't tell her when he started feeling this way, couldn't blame some new medication. His highly forthcoming answers only came when Aaron prodded him to clear his throat and expound on that which ailed him; Wade wouldn't be the type to speak up and demand attention if his arm had been cut off, to say nothing of a chill.

There was nothing in Nurse Millar's state-mandated training covering such symptoms as, to quote, "feels like the marrow in my bones is turning to ice... like something sad reached inside and dipped its finger in the weakest part, and the whole thing's freezing over... I feel like my ribcage is going to crack and the cold's gonna dump all over what's inside me."

As Wade struggled to vocalize the pain he remembered a car accident—not that one, a different one he'd seen as a child, where the front tire had ended up sitting right on top of some luckless pedestrian's chest. He'd been fascinated by how the skeletal structure was able to hold the heavy machine up all by itself, and he'd pressed on his own sternum in confused awe.

"I was always fuckin' terrible at keeping those shits under my tongue," said Aaron, referring to the thermometer in his friend's mouth. And he returned his attention to a chart encouraging the young to eat fruit. A joke was forming in his mind.

Wade felt the cold creeping up the bones in his left leg. It started at his heel and worked its way north, and it was only in the bones; he could see them in the pain as clearly and distinctly as if he was pointing them out on the skeleton hanging in the biology lab. He'd gotten an A-minus on the quiz that unit, which enabled him to know just when his tibia iced over.

In a matter of moments his body would freeze and die. It would happen before Nurse Millar's radio reached the end of the Savage Garden song.

No. Slowing now.

"He's havin' a hard time over this Kiki thing," Aaron explained to Nurse Millar. "I think he just needs some time to think it over."

"Well, his temperature's right on the money," said the nurse, sliding the thermometer out of his mouth seconds before the damning cold infected his jaw and teeth and rendered him dumb and paralyzed.

The radio switched over to the Spice Girls. Aaron grinned, did a little dance to cheer Wade up, and rocked his friend back and forth to the tune. Wade allowed himself to smile. Using the muscles, letting himself feel something, warmed him up a bit, and anyway Aaron's touch was warm and healing in a completely heterosexual way.

"He's smiling!" said Aaron. "I saw a smile!"

"Felt like I had a damn ice cube sewn up inside my pelvis," said Wade, and he stood up. Concentrated on the music and on the immediate facts, let the cold universe slip away from him. "I'm sorry, Nurse Millar. I didn't mean to waste your time. Everything was just shuttin' down on me."

"You kids stress yourselves out too much," she said. "With that poor girl—it's too much. I feel for you. I do." She rearranged some Q-tips in a clear glass case. "Y'know,"

she said, “a girl from my high school died. My junior year. It was a much bigger school, a girls’ school out in Queens. It was so big we barely noticed, even the next day. I didn’t know who she was till she was gone.”

Wade saw Aaron nod uncomfortably.

“You kids are lucky you get to know each other,” continued Nurse Millar. “Don’t take that for granted.”

“We’re a small class,” said Aaron.

“Yeah,” Wade agreed, and to say so hurt his jaw. The chill had come back for a weaker relapse, just in the mouth. He rubbed his chin. It didn’t do a thing.

Red Corners was one of those towns so small that there wasn’t a thing to do but fuck, and while Connecticut had quite a few of those towns they were generally upscale enough to merit classier description. Fairfield North kids made love. Red Corners kids fucked, or got fucked (sexual politics in the community had either advanced or devolved enough to spawn a differentiation in terms).

Wade was a sensible young man, very soft-spoken, but he knew enough to know what he was entitled to. No one would call him a pushover. He’d won a prize for the debate team once. And Kiki had developed a reputation such that, well, when you went to see a movie, you expect credits to roll at the end, when you go out to dinner you expect a dessert when it’s all over, right? That was just the way of it. Expectations arise. News travels pretty quick in a small town.

“We shouldn’t have skipped class,” said Wade as they left the nurse’s office and headed into the cafeteria.

“I could totally go for a Snickers bar right now, hold up,” was Aaron’s studied reply. He eyed the vending machine hungrily and fumbled for his wallet.

“If I had any damn sense I woulda come right back to class after the funeral. Don’t need to try and milk it. Stuff to do.”

“You have a legitimate reason to skip class. Stop complaining.”

“There are shades of legitimate.” They were both missing English. Wade knew in his heart he could have made it if he’d tried. Aaron had already made up his mind to squeeze every point of self-serving sloth from communal grief that was around to be had.

They both had English class together—it was for the AP—and they were doing a unit on the Gothic novel just to get that base covered, all in good timely fun for Halloween. Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* was the topic, and “Unclean! Unclean!” had become a bit of a catchphrase within the classroom. There was much discussion on what the Victorians found sexy, and how *Dracula* fit into that. How was he a psychosexual metaphor for the eroticization of women? Discuss in three pages. (Wade got bonus points for noting Lucy Westenra to be, as her name could tell you, “the light of the west”.)

Mr. Bendricks was always such a good friend to Wade, very encouraging, always had nice things to say in friendly red letters on his essays. Wade felt guilty about skipping English. It wasn’t like him to pull a crazy, anything-goes stunt like that.

The cafeteria was largely empty. A couple of sophomores on their free period, sitting across from each other, quietly chugging away on busywork. One of them mumbled something about something on TV last night.

Aaron was drumming his fingers on the glass of the vending machine. Someone had taken the last Snickers bar, which made him or her open to Aaron's comment on said consumer's sexual orientation, habits and hygiene. "Fuck you, Milky Way," he said, and pressed the buttons to summon it. "I wanted peanut crunch. I get no peanut. Why, Wade? Why I no get peanut?"

"You coulda had a PayDay, or a NutRageous," Wade pointed out.

"You're so observant, why don't you say such smart things before I put my money in." Aaron's watch was caught on the door of the drawer keeping him from his chocolate treat. "Fucking faggot. I hope you die."

For some reason Wade wasn't keeping up with the jokes as quickly today.

They parted at the corner of the high school, down at the curb where the stoners held court. Wade and Aaron did not live in quite the same portion of town, owing to socioeconomic stratification—even Red Corners had its richer and its poorer. (You could only tell the difference because Wade often wore a polo shirt to school. This was referred to by his joshing schoolmates as his Fairfield North outfit. The Red Corners wag squad had gotten very sophisticated over the past few years.)

Aaron's walk home took him past the Malones' little white farm house, complete with remnants of an authentic farm attached. It only here occurred to him to wonder where the hell people were getting all these damn flowers from. Mr. and Mrs. Sloane ran a little operation (of which had been spoken in a recent highly elevated conversation relating to non-heteronormative practices), but they were old folk and unlikely to fashion wreaths or carry products more exotic than one's standard daisy.

He cast a wayward glance at a second-story window out which a vibrant young woman once looked, and dreamed. And he felt, as might be expected, absolutely nothing.

Wade had a good lie-down when he got home and thought about Kiki as if there was something the hell else was there to think about.

'Date rape' was not a term in active parlance at this point in time, and anyway it was too strong for where Wade was heading. Putting a few drinks in a girl and getting friendly was just part of small-town life. 'No' meant something only somewhat more negative than 'yes', especially with girls like Kiki. In fact, with pretty much anyone wandering around calling herself Kiki.

Their last date had concluded in the parking lot behind the drugstore, a popular place for dates to go in more interesting directions than conclusion. There was a billboard to look at and a harsh white light on a pole.

Wade's preferred dating vehicle, insomuch as there was call for one, was usually his father's pickup truck, which was crimson-colored and manly, though he was planning to rebrand with his mother's fetching brown sedan just to seem like less of a redneck. Some Red Corners people, already looking into the future to such exotic locales as Darien, were very concerned about this sort of reputation.

Kiki's reputation, on the other hand, was quite firmly cemented, and Wade's hands had, one would think, the right to wander. The boundaries of the everpresent cheerleader sweater had always been a little blurry.

It had been a little cold that night, and the stars in the summer chill were clear. The town was too far from the city for light pollution, except from that one big ol' lamp. Pinpoints of bright white, clear and in focus. Very sharp. Very, very sharp.

There was sort of a murky, lazy stream of celestial vomit in the sky above Red Corners as autumn night crept down.

Wade's little lie-down had apparently become a multi-hour lie-down without his permission. The kind of rest where you just sort of collapse on the bed and don't even bother to adjust your legs. He couldn't piece together six hours of thoughts or dreams, but never mind; there was homework to do. He excused himself from dinner with the family, downed a glass of milk, reassured his mother he was all right (which, to be fair, he was), and set about the business.

It was just as well. His mother was serving the traditional Dorothy Robinson repast. Chicken (grilled) and broccoli (steamed), long stems on the latter. Wade was no gourmand, but a kid needed some variety in his life.

It was too damn cold in Wade's room to study, though he was too polite to inform his parents of domestic failings in the thermostat department, particularly after refusing his mother's cooking. He retreated to his father's study; the house was small, but there was still a room or two that no one managed to actually go into, and this was that kind of place. Wood-paneled walls, shelves full of dusty books from the sixties, a globe for some reason. All was quiet.

The ten o'clock news was past national stories and local interest and was in the entertainment portion of things by the time Wade emerged from the study, books under his arm. The place was dark. His parents tended to go to bed kind of early.

Every step up to the second floor creaked. This came as a bit of a surprise; he hadn't noticed the sound before, and it wasn't as if the house was any quieter tonight than other nights. Or maybe it was. Still, his folks were sound sleepers, and a little creaking wasn't an issue.

He called it an early night, in bed by eleven-fifteen. As he wrapped himself up in the cool sheets and heavy blanket, he couldn't remember a time when he had felt, in a purely physical sense, smaller. Like the bed was just going to stretch on forever and swallow him whole.

Friday morning signaled a Hardingesque return to normalcy at Red Corners High. The mourners were back in class and the discussion had turned to the football game.

The Fairfield County Friday Night Gridiron Bonanza was a very special tradition that within twenty years would be forgotten by all involved. While the traditional hanging-in-effigy of the health teacher's CPR dummy dressed in Fairfield North colors was dispensed with, out of respect for other deaths, you couldn't keep a good bunch of kids down when it came to school spirit. Even the Asian kid was in good cheer. Go Rebels.

Aaron considered the game a massive waste of time and thus couldn't wait to attend. His allegiance to Red Corners High was confined largely to his enjoyment of swapping morning barbs with Seymour, the cafeteria fry cook, but he had a genuine fondness for the individual people in his small town if not for the institution itself. Aaron

collected people, as some do bugs. To the surprise of many, he had volunteered his services to handle the cash box for the sales of baked goods, t-shirts, pennants and whatever the hell else could be hawked to raise money for the PTA. “Jews are excellent with money,” he’d said, a satisfied smile crossing his face.

Jews ranked about third on his list of fine targets for humor, with second being women and first being Wade. A cheerful misogyny made Aaron almost fairly popular with the girls; he validated their sense of low self-esteem. It wasn’t that he was actually prejudiced at heart; he was just an asshole, and a guy could get pretty far in high school with that kind of self-knowledge. The world, too, if there was one outside Red Corners to be gone to.

At the start of lunchtime Aaron took the cash box from a vault in the office and brought it to the front where a couple of perky seniors were selling buttons or something equally gay. “There’s fifty dollars in there. One ten, two fives, a bunch of singles, roll of quarters. Fuck it up and I kill you.” (He was a very diligent treasurer.)

It wasn’t that he’d be upset to see a worthy cause lose money. It wasn’t to protect his own hide, either. It was just that a job getting screwed up and it not being his fault, that wasn’t his thing.

At the end of lunchtime Wade was cold again and blamed it on his Coca-Cola. The can had felt different when he took it out of the vending machine, he rationalized, different from other cans. Like it had a piece of ice floating inside it, a cylindrical core of cold that had found its way inside.

And he hadn’t eaten much. A boring sandwich. Some corn flakes that morning, taken without milk and without interest. It wasn’t enough to keep him going through bio.

He had no good answer for why he’d chosen tuna fish, either. It had no spark, no life, and as he’d chewed its mealy, goopy, sad gray textures down to mush he’d wondered why he’d chosen the most passionless of all sandwiches.

It was the story of his life. There was his life in his hands out in front of him, sopping between two wet pieces of white bread that were also his life.

Maybe he was distracted by Aaron’s rowdy chitchat with Seymour the fry cook. Aaron was always so loud, and usually saying something he shouldn’t. Wade became keenly aware that someone—not Aaron, someone in the cafeteria—was talking about him.

It wasn’t much to go on, but it was unpleasant enough, and he found himself eating quickly, then slowly, then quickly again, not tasting his tuna fish. He could feel eyes on him, judging him and his tuna fish. It was a cold sandwich and no comfort.

Aaron ate light. He was more of a snacker. He would pop down between classes and grab a buttered roll, “my customary buttered roll” he would call it, and lunch was more a social hour for him than anything. Besides, he was on business.

The perky seniors at the front table had switched out and in their place was some well-meaning dork and Missy Zenerbell. Aaron disliked Missy Zenerbell because people liked her. She was the Renaissance sculpture goddess of the junior class whose beauty seemed to feed upon her refusal to genuinely interact with absolutely anything.

She sat with her ankles crossed, flicking her ribbon-tied ponytail back and forth as she droned of figures at Aaron. Cheerleader skirt tugged down to regulation length. She

dreamed of becoming a model, and had appeared in photos that hung in the front window of a department store in Bridgeport.

Missy Zenerbell's preternaturally astonishing body was the result of serious ballet training. In life, she had openly taunted Kiki's curvier form, even tried to bring the term 'thunder thighs' back into vogue, without success. She was the only cheerleader not to make the funeral. No doubt she could not spare the tears; the proteins were needed to nourish her beautiful muscles.

Aaron totaled the cash box. Made some notes on a well-worn scrap of paper. Scribbled his initials at the bottom. He was told who to give the cash box to at the game tomorrow, and when. This would require an actual conversation with Cassidy Dale-Walters, but Aaron was willing to take one for the team.

Wade didn't go in for after-school activities. He was more of a loner. When the bell rang that afternoon he just headed home. There was homework to be done, and if he got it done early he'd have the whole weekend to enjoy itself. Wade was a planner.

Wade's plan in life was to major in history at a nice college somewhere in New England, and to walk across quadrangles. He knew exactly who the Red Corners Rebels had been named for and what they did and why they were important. As a child he'd pored over books of information, almanacs and records and collections of data for the curious child. Presidents had always been his favorite; as early as first grade he knew all about Rutherford B. Hayes and Chester A. Arthur, and considered them no less worthy of his study than the Roosevelts; after all, a President was a President, wasn't he? For some reason his favorite trivia topic was how everyone died. He remembered once solemnly telling his mother, for no reason at all, some factoid about some dead white man, and concluding with "He died of a heart attack."

Wade may well have already been earmarked for the Class of 1998 senior superlatives as "most likely to become President", himself, except that that one generally went to the class president, because the yearbook editors were lazy. (In the end, 1998 would prove to be a pretty dismal summer for President fans, though Clinton's indiscretions with Miss Lewinsky, much like Wade's with Miss Malone, were not yet the stuff of active headlines.)

"Why's it so cold in here," Wade muttered to no one (and he knew it) as he started in on the weekend's worksheets, and no one responded.

Busywork was a cherished value in the Red Corners community, and Wade could almost hear the machinery in his hand crank along as he banged through his equations, a pinball rattling its way down a field of bumpers. It was joyless, and, worse, it gave his mind time to wander.

He didn't much remember the last half of what he was doing. As his hand scrawled out the answer for problem 48 he could feel the veil of sleep lifting from his face even though he knew he'd never shut his eyes. Somewhere midway through he'd felt a presence touch his hand, reassuringly, calmly, and guide him through the problems just a little quicker.

It wasn't doing the math for him, no; it let him know that he was doing all the work, that it was all up in his head and he just needed a little help translating it out to

inky scratches. The presence—for lack of a better term—trusted him to do what he was supposed to do. It took him at his word.

‘X equals fifteen’, he wrote.

I trusted you, Wade, said the voice.

Okay, so it had a voice now.

I knew you would solve that problem just the right way, it continued.

Who are you, Wade did not write, did not think.

And of course there was no answer.

“Where the fuck are you?” was the second thing Aaron asked.

“Dude, are you ready to go?” had been his first question.

The phone rang before any of these inquiries had been issued, and it startled Wade in no small proportion. He felt as if he’d been sleeping forever. But nothing had happened.

Nothing like this was supposed to happen, Wade.

Aaron’s Goddamned situation, in more or less his own words, was simple: he needed a Goddamned ride to the game and his Goddamned parents were out with Wade’s parents (aww, how cute) and his Goddamned sister had taken the other car and now what. “And,” he continued, “I actually do have to be there because I need to get the Goddamned cash box to blah blah blah Aaron just shut the fuck up Jesus he really is going to give me his life story isn’t he

People need so much of you, Wade. You have learned to be giving.

Wade poked his head into the garage, surveyed vehicular availability. “Yeah, no, sure, I’ve got the pickup,” he murmured.

“Mm. Your folks took the brown beast?”

“I guess. Guess they’re not going to a tailgate party later, are they?”

“Not with my folks they’re not. The only football concept my Goddamn father’s familiar with is the tight end.”

It’s nice we could talk, continued the voice. *I wanted to clear the air.*

An interlude:

Aaron’s endeavors in the field of athleticism as both patron and participant were pretty much on par with the Jewish stereotype he took so much care to milk so much from. This extended, predictably, to perhaps no all-American sport more than football. He found catching the strange ball in its spearlike path a trial, and his reedlike form lent itself to buckling over at key intervals. As early as middle school he had seen the future, and the football team was not part of it, and as such he had busied himself laying the groundwork to call the Rebels a bunch of dumbasses and make it seem a sincere indictment of society’s priorities of athletic development over academic achievement, rather than the sourest of grapes.

At least twice Wade was a team captain for a P.E. class football matchup and yet failed to choose Aaron for his team first, or even in the early development of the drafts. This really hurt Aaron very much, though he would never dream to let anyone know that.

Aaron’s best sport was cross-country, and although he was not much of a joiner, he went so far as to run on the team in tenth grade. He claimed his people were used to running across countries.

It was resolved that Aaron would make his way over to Wade's, cash box in hand, whereupon they would embark on an automotive journey that would change their lives forever or maybe just get the Godforsaken cash box to the game on time.

It probably would have made more sense for Wade to have picked Aaron up but since he was the one being asked a favor of, Aaron wasn't enough of an asshole to make him do extra work to set the favor in motion and blah blah blah just get over here will you Jesus.

A second interlude:

Wade and Aaron had P.E. with Tommy Owen. Actually, Wade would have picked Tommy first had said Tommy been the type to make any sort of effort for education, physical or otherwise. (He was the type who saved it for the game.)

The P.E. football matches started practically right at the top of the school year. Tommy and Kiki had been going out for maybe two months by then. Social rumor in Red Corners traveled quickly and as such Wade had been given maybe two months (minus a few hours) to prepare his canned response in case Tommy were to ask him what exactly went down during earlier courtships.

Fortunately Tommy was not the inquisitive sort. Not even a weird glance.

Jesus, Wade, you should have seen me, the day he first noticed me, I mean really noticed me, said the voice. *I knew I was going to spend all summer at the lake and I really wanted to not look like a heifer this time.*

Wade was still standing in the garage.

I was doing crunches and leg lifts all that spring and I had actually started to feel good about myself. And that first morning on the lake I actually fit into that white bikini I'd felt so stupid buying two years ago, and I swear to God there were tears in my eyes and I hid them in lake water and he saw me, me in my bikini, all my hard work.

There was no way for Wade to have known any of this because he wasn't there, and so the thoughts could not have emerged from his subconscious. Thus he could not have possibly heard the thoughts. This logical approach did not improve his humor.

I just wanted to do a right thing for myself after all the wrong things. And he saw how I was finally changing and we began a wonderful time together and then one false move in a car took it all away.

And though Wade only dimly sensed her presence as he stared with shame at what was not the brown sedan, he still, nonetheless, couldn't work up any better a response than *Why were you wearing your cheerleader sweater in the Godforsaken spring?*

"You all right?" said Aaron.

It was years later and Wade was remembering a voice from his past, from when he was a student at the high school and not a beloved history teacher. Good old Mr. Robinson, everyone's favorite teacher, who turned right back around to give back to the small town that made him the man he was—

"You all right?" repeated Aaron. He thumped the bottom of the cash box, twice.

Wade shook his head and shook off the years with it, and came back to where he was. To a garage in Fairfield County on a chilly October night, where his mind had slipped away as he'd gazed glassily at some stupid old truck.

"Yeah, yeah," lied Wade.

"Seriously, you all right? You don't look good."

Wade said two words and they were both 'yeah'.

He didn't tell Aaron about the vision, which had spooled out in front of his eyes with the flicker and the slight softness of a movie dancing across the screen. He didn't tell Aaron about how they went their separate ways, how in the months and years after high school they would begin to lose touch, as Wade pulled away from his shell of expectations and began to truly live his life; and Jesus, what the hell was Aaron even doing with himself, when was he gonna grow up, it was sad was what it was. He didn't tell Aaron about returning to Red Corners and teaching history, right in Mrs. Dennis' old room, about settling into his new life with, well, call it dignity if you have to.

He didn't tell Aaron about wearing patches on his elbows and calling his students by their last names as he imagined the teachers in the rich kid prep schools might, and how his studied air of bland maturity had so amused Katherine Malone, all grown up and tending bar at Flanagan's on Duell Street. And how she wore a white dress at the wedding just like the one she'd always dreamed of and how she'd looked up at him blissfully, forgivingly, as the old man blessed them in the sight of God and made everything right.

(And how while they were out making a real life together, they'd think back on Aaron, who never really did anything, and feel sorry for him; but God, those were old times...)

It couldn't have taken more than three minutes for Wade to live his whole life out and three small words for Aaron to take it all away.

"Well, shall we?" he asked, and made a gesture with his head.

Wade wasn't sure. He didn't want to say goodbye to the adoring soft brown eyes, looking up from under a blonde sweep. She was so close to actually standing there, as if her image was printed on transparency paper hovering in the space between atoms. It made for an improvement over the sight of Aaron, hanging around dumbly with his mouth all open.

And so, of course, it went away.

As Wade touched the handle of the pickup truck door he felt an abrupt shift from slight chill to frostbite, and he jerked his hand away just before his fingers planned to announce their departure.

"You've been acting weird all day, man," said Aaron.

Explaining the situation to Aaron would have to wait until Wade could explain it to himself. He had only his apologies to offer.

"I don't think we should go," he whimpered, lamely, clenching his fist and letting his frightened fingers warm up in his palm.

"Dude!" was Aaron's response, to effectively remind all involved of his need for a ride so as to not catch hell from Cassidy Dale-Walters, who really was a pain in the ass.

"I can't drive that thing," said Wade, as the cold passed from his fingertips, dissipated, settling instead as a slight breeze over his shoulders, like a massage. "I've had a few."

“I pregame too, but I do it responsibly,” said Aaron. It was the principle that annoyed him here. “Fine. You’re not going out? Let me borrow the pickup. I gotta get to the frickin’ game.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” said Wade, shaping the words with more confidence but less cadence now, distracted by the feel of cheaply manicured girl-hands on his shoulders, sometimes touching, sometimes pushing. “Bad things could happen—in that truck.” The words were spoken as if by a computer.

“You look as if you’ve seen a ghost,” Aaron did not say to Wade, although he would have done well to contribute such a thought.

The official report was that Wade had bled to death, in the minutes or hours by the side of the road. That he had left the party before the other kids, maybe two in the morning, and took a road home that didn’t see much traffic even in the busiest of times.

It was a matter of basic science that he had suffered. That the iron prison hadn’t crushed him, hadn’t had the kindness to mercifully end his life at the crash. The time between the incident and the departure could have been anywhere from five minutes to a couple of hours. He’d have to wait and find out.

And so he lay there in pain, unable to move, his lower body twisted and broken. Blood was seeping from a cut; something was poking him, down someplace he couldn’t see, caught up around the skirt of the slutty black dress he’d worn to the party. He couldn’t see much beyond the empty asphalt ahead, filtered through a few metal splinters of a car that had ripped itself against the tree in a manner worthy of modern art.

He lifted his right arm, somehow free. Touched the massive gash cutting across his forehead. The blood on his fingers looked black in the night, and he could only imagine the cruel parody of his friendly face that he’d been left with; if anyone ever did see him again, they’d still never love him, really this time.

This was the moment when his shock turned to despair, and as he sobbed he noticed a couple of teeth were loose. These were the facts he latched onto, because facts were less horrifying than untamed imagination.

And as Wade fumbled for the headlight controls, for the radio, for the cell phone in his purse, for anything that might have landed close by to pluck him from his nightmare, he found he didn’t mind that things were getting blacker. It wasn’t fear any more. It was regret.

His senior prom and graduation day were the first to go, of course. For he would lose himself chronologically, each beauty of his potential stripped from him in turn. Next would go college, setting out on his own, becoming the person he was meant to be. The good nice smart person inside him that he knew God knew was there all along. Dead now. Sleepy now. The images grew hazy as he drifted further into the future, but the feelings were as sharp as ever: dreams of getting out, changing the world, forgetting the Red Corners High School years like the mistake they were. Really sleepy. Eyes closing now. Finding a place, making a home. Meeting that special boy he’d been waiting his whole life for. Those feelings were curling, turning to ash, old photographs licked away by small flames.

The shroud of black lifted, briefly, as his babies slowly died. He thought he heard sirens, in the distance. Too much light. His eyes shut again, really heavy now.

Somehow Wade only realized then that this wasn't his death, it was Kiki's, which, if nothing else, explained the purse. And as he felt his future returned to him, he chose not to focus on the fact that Kiki got no such forgiveness.

"I can't believe we're walking," said Aaron as he walked.

Since Aaron had to be at the game and was out of automotive options, walking was in order, and they'd have to cut through the woods to get there on anything resembling time. As he'd failed his friend, for his penance, Wade was forced to tag along, suffer through the whole damn game with Aaron, and bear his jocular wrath for the next couple of days.

There were still woods in these parts. The kinds of woods kids could ride bikes in, swing from trees in, maybe later, if they were lucky, find a 1978 *Playboy* in. They weren't torn up into house lots yet.

Those woods ended after a certain point, and then you were in the woods that really were the woods, in the dark sense of the word and of the world.

These woods, these older woods, were deep; these were the places where Indians had buried their children and where lost people went to never again be found. These were the places where a tree could fall and never make a sound. These were the places where the call of the night bird took on dimensions, and became haunting.

These woods were the ones that resisted the attacks and the follies of man. That hadn't been paved over and cruelly renamed Cedar Street or Forest Drive.

Forest Drive was where town more or less began, depending on which way you approached it. Red Corners was empty. The stoplights were going on and off to let nobody pass; the area was still.

Neither Wade nor Aaron would go so far as to make such an observation, but they had never been so alone in the middle of their town. Kids never walked through the center of town on those teenage night-crawls of boozy giggles and hushed voices; they'd go around, so as not to be seen by cops, to have the secrecy of three in the morning. They had something like that here, now.

The movie theater. The coffeehouse. The ice cream place on the corner. Completely deserted. The whole place looked like it'd been abandoned overnight. Some disaster, perhaps. Flood. Evacuation. Not a football game.

It had rained before. Lightly. In the blink of time when Wade had been in the garage, thinking of people he wasn't. Now the streets were damp, taking on the colors of small-town lights. A harsh golden splash across the intersection. Red in the gutters.

"It's so quiet," said Wade, to stop it from being so.

They crossed Shelton Street without looking for cars. Over to the ice cream parlor, past the two banks hunched up next to each other. And onward. And the only sound in the world was the clunk of the old green cash box.

"I can't believe we're walking," stated Aaron.

They were almost at the other edge of town when Wade realized how wrong something was.

"I'm not cold any more," he blurted.

Aaron cocked his head and nodded. "Well, that's just great. Good for you, buddy," he said. "I'm glad we had this talk."

"No, you don't get it. The thing I went to the nurse over. It's like, it just went away, about, like, a few minutes ago."

"All by itself?"

"All by itself," Wade replied, feeling a little bit all by himself.

He tried to remember the last time he felt the chill. Back around the vision, the side of the road, the car. Kiki's last revelation sometime in the dark hours between Saturday night and Sunday morning. It faded around the same time she did.

He cast his eyes about, as if expecting someone to pop up and explain things to him in a calm and reasonable manner. Nothing. A house without its lights on. A mailbox. The old church, lost in shadows.

The voice wasn't there, wasn't talking, wasn't carrying on like everything was normal, the way it used to do. Was it gone? He felt fuzzy, in that waking-up way. Exactly like waking up. Figuring out where he was, what time it was. Getting bearings.

He touched his fuzzy head with a clammy hand. Still searching for the voice. He felt himself trying to tense up his brain, as he might have done waking up on a lazy Sunday morning, stretching lazy legs, flexing sleepy fingers.

Then he felt the fingers.

He doubled over. His hands felt dirty. Woody. He could feel something now, little bits of dirt crawling over his panicked palms, all sweaty, clumps and clods cascading. Muck under the fingernails. The voice wasn't speaking, not any more, only breathing.

Hard.

Gasping.

And he didn't want to feel something inside him die, not again, and so he cast his eyes up at the church, and it stared right back down at him, dark and forbidding.

Are you all right?! he asked.

What happened, was the answer. It's dark here.

Don't go away again. He was really trying to help her. Follow my voice.

I'm scared, Wade.

You're doing fine, he promised it. Come back to me.

"Earth to Wade!" shouted Aaron, shaking the cash box in his ear. "We movin' or what? Jesus cock."

It scared away the voice, and they moved.

Wade didn't bother to berate Aaron for so efficiently combining profanity and blasphemy in front of a church. He didn't need to. Aaron had already (to his credit) cast an eye toward the place, and thrown it a mournful nod.

"I understand what you mean about feeling cold," he said.

But Wade didn't feel the cold. There was a new sensation in his mind now, the feel of breaking through, of reaching, of coming to new understandings. Of looking up, and glimpsing moonlight.

The main drag ended at Calhoun Street, which split off into its two directions, one of which would take you to go see some football, if you were one for taking roads. But, as Aaron might have noted, they were walking, and so their eyes were fixed on the mouth of the woods.

It began with a well-worn dirt path. After twenty feet, you dipped down a little hill. Trees around, but no grass. Autumn leaves in piles of their own design. A couple of pieces of cast-iron playground equipment on the right. A swing set and something too dark to see.

“My mom used to take me here when I was little,” said Wade, in a voice that made him sound like he was little still. He wondered if it was true. He was there once, he knew that, but.

Aaron was walking a little bit behind. He imagined his friend as a child, chubby-cheeked, swinging, smiling, hugging his mommy. He realized his friend was thinking of himself the same way.

Leaves crunched under their feet. Aaron thought back to his own childhood, back to a happy moment on a tire swing as a boy, and began to feel a little bit cold.

Ever since childhood Wade had suffered from a strange compulsion to count his steps. Only when he was alone, normally. And not in numbers, not always starting from step one and going on. It was more of a counting-off than a count, as if to keep pace. He'd set his steps to song lyrics or strange verses, or jingles from stupid commercials. Anything, really. Right now he was thinking of the thumping beat from a New Wave song he'd heard in a movie once, more rests than notes, twelve notes in all, and he was pacing it to lyrics in his head:

I think I'm running away, I won't be back before another day.

In the music it was the space between the notes that set the tone, and he was filling that up with useless text, to drive it out.

You can keep thinking if it keeps you from sinking.

That wasn't his voice.

You can keep dreaming if it keeps you from seeming.

He didn't have to ask who it was.

Crunch, crunch, and still he found the need to make sense of his steps, to set his march to four-four time and lazy rhyme, *This is the song of Kiki Malone, she shouldn't have tried to drive alone. Thump-thump. Say goodbye to Kiki Malone, the girl who never ever made it home.* These were improvised rhymes and not very much otherwise, but it kept him moving.

“You ever come this way before?” It was Aaron.

“Last year, for another game,” said Wade. “A Saturday day game, it was daytime then. Seemed like a shorter walk.”

“I'll bet.” Aaron looked around. The dirt path under their feet was half leaves by now. “We should be able to hear noise, see the lights of the field before long. Figures the one impressive thing they build in this town and it's not even in the town.”

A pause. “Yeah.”

But there was light. More than starlight. They could see the trees as they passed, the leaves under their feet, as if some five-thousand-kilowatt arc lamp was following just behind, carrying with it the magnetic hum of the electric pulse, making the ground vibrate just the littlest bit beneath their sneakers. Sheets of black night visible between harsh-textured tree trunks.

And the strange thing was, it didn't feel strange to them at all.

A minute passed.

Sixty individual seconds, alone in the dark.

This is what it feels like to be dead, thought Wade, in his own voice, though not by choice. It was one of the things he said in cadence with his step, in triplets. *This-is-what it-feels-like to-be-dead*, Kiki was joining him on the first beat, on the step, on the breaking of the leaves.

Good old Mr. Robinson hadn't recognized the bartender at first, for her face was older, wiser. The face of someone who'd made a few mistakes, framed by chunky blonde highlights in darker hair, as if her hair had also learned to be sadder, somehow.

There would be days, years down the road, when he would stop recognizing her, long after his retirement party and shaking the hands of all the students he'd made into better men, kind of in the middle of those years where your friends have already started burying their other friends. The years when he'd stare in her brown eyes and love not the who but the what, as if he only loved because he knew in the back of his mind that he had a reason to.

The brown eyes would look into the glassy eyes with sadness but not with pity. No reason to feel bad for Wade, he doesn't even know what's going on...

You knew. You knew, bleated the voice in Wade's head.

"You really know where we're going?" brayed the voice outside his head. Aaron was shifting from low gear into high dudgeon. "I think we made a wrong turn."

"There weren't any turns."

"There should have been. To make."

Wade gestured vaguely with his left hand. "The football stadium's over there."

"But we didn't turn to it—"

"Because it's over there. Not down here."

"I dunno, man," said Wade. "Seems pretty close to me."

"Okay, if it's supposed to be here, then what's down there?"

No answer.

You knew this would happen.

They pushed on.

The wind whistled, and Wade shivered, and wondered how they'd found their way here. He realized that the last thing he remembered understanding didn't quite line up back-to-back with where they were now. And he couldn't account for what happened.

"Man," whined Aaron. That was all.

And so Wade imagined Man, coming to these forests for the first time, the first people of Connecticut, fresh off the land bridge and rushing for the coast of their new America. No. Further back. He imagined Man not as mankind but as some concept, something not in the sense of humanity but in the sense of Man as opposed to Woman, and how the two had planted these forests when the world was younger. His Man was middle-aged, bearded, resolute, a Man of few words; a Hephaestus, the blacksmith, toiling, never smiling.

His Woman was a songstress, a chanter, a cheerleader, perhaps, and her songs created the woods.

And in their meeting, the ground opened up, and life erupted, up and out.

It hurts, came the voice. *It hurts real bad.*

Wade grew very aware of the notion that at one point these trees had not been here, that they had to have come from someplace. He could see the trees and feel them being born, now, called into existence by a force larger and more violent than themselves. The sound of that chant echoed still, the wood a natural resonator, and the cold places in his bones seemed to get a little colder as the soundwaves knocked through him.

“The term ‘eldritch’ is tossed around so liberally these days,” Aaron murmured, as they trudged on through old places.

They chose to stop at an old cabin to ask directions, on the grounds that neither of them had ever noticed a cabin there before and it seemed worth investigating. A brown squarish affair on a foundation of stones that did not give the impression of readiness for plumbing. Even if it had been there all this time, which would have been weird, there was no apparent reason for it to have been there, which was worse.

Neither felt the need to knock. Aaron opened the door, cautiously, which was out of character for him. The room inside was pretty much empty. A bench beside an old stone fireplace. The room was dim but not dark; it had that incorrect kind of light they’d seen on television, where it’s supposed to be dark but you can still see the characters.

“Guess a woodcutter lived here,” said Aaron.

“Recalls the old folk tales,” murmured Wade. “The woodsman who saved Little Red Riding Hood from the wolf at the last minute. The voice of civilization rushing in, reaching to save us from primal fears. Convenient.”

“No, I mean an actual woodcutter,” said Aaron, irritated, and he nudged something on the floor with his foot. A hatchet. The handle had once been painted red; a few chips were left.

“Oh, check it out,” Wade said, catching up.

“I’m already there,” said Aaron. He bent at the waist, picked up the trusty old ax. Grasped the sturdy wood handle with a firm grip, nodded his approval. “Don’t make ‘em like they used to. Dusty as fuck, though.” He wiped some dust away from the blade with his thumb.

“Don’t cut yourself.”

“I’m not retarded.”

Wade nodded, coughed. “You ever seen this place before?”

“Naw, but I don’t get out much.” Beat. He picked up the cash box again, stuffed it under his arm. “We should be able to hear the game by now. People cheering. Gay-ass marching band.”

The only sound was the wind.

The ending of this tale was perhaps inevitable.

They stepped out of the cabin. Wade shivered, held his clothes around him and made a noise like a discontent horse. Aaron let the door slam with an unsatisfying bang. He still had the damned ax. He just liked it, was all.

The wind was kicking up what there was to kick, making dry dead leaves skitter along the ground in little whirls. “We should be able to hear something, see the lights, we should,” Aaron muttered.

“Do you wanna go back?”

“We came all this way.”

Wade looked down toward the way they came, but it looked curiously like the road ahead, and what had been the way ahead seemed to remind him an awful lot of the way they came.

“We’re going to die out here, aren’t we,” murmured Aaron. He gave the ax a playful swing at nothing.

“Hey, set up an ax yard if you’re gonna do that,” Wade joshed him. “Lanyard. A safety circle.”

“A perfect circle,” Aaron said back, for no reason.

Then the ground shouted something.

It was the only way Wade could have thought to describe it; a shockwave of sound coming up from below the leaves, shaking them for a chitter in response, knocking them out of their slumping stances. Aaron fell clean over, dropping the ax, letting the cash box tumble to the ground; he retained enough presence of mind not to fall on anything sharp.

Wade wasn’t so much knocked by the surprise as by something physical, as if something from the trees had leapt onto him, wrestled him to the ground. It was definitely an object and it had hands.

“Oh shit—” he said.

He struggled to a kneeling stance, pawing at his back, his shoulders. “Get off,” he grunted. “Get off, get off—”

Baby no.

“Aaron!”

Aaron was unconscious, not seeing a thing. He looked peaceful.

I love you don’t do this to me—

“Aaron, get the fuck up!” The words came strangled. Wade could feel himself choking, but softly, as if he were a dog straining against a leash and all he had to do was relent.

Which of course only made him want to run.

—don’t leave me—

Wade threw the bony arms off his shoulders, lunged for the ax. Felt something grab at his ankle, pulling him.

“No, no,” he grunted, yanking at Aaron’s limp arm. No good. He felt himself sliding down the ground, dragged by darkness. Cast his eyes up at where the cabin stood, but there was nothing there now. “No.” Only more Connecticut trees.

He scrambled away, back those few yards, back toward Aaron, back to before it all went to hell. The crawl got harder as it went on. He felt the chill in his body expand outward, break through his skin, solidify in the atmosphere and turn to sweat. It was all but splashing out of him, soaking through his clothing. He flashed back to a lifesaving exercise at Boy Scout camp, jumping into the lake in a sweatshirt, feeling it get heavy with water; he could feel the wet weight of it now, wrapped around his arms and neck.

—there’s still time for us—it’s okay now—

It took more strength than he’d bargained for to flop himself over, crane his neck up, get a look at what he was caught on.

He saw a shambling form reaching out, backlit by some new white fog that had followed it in. A cheated, baleful stare pierced him, made him sit up, take notice. His nostrils flared to accept the odor of steaming-hot flesh, rotting in the haze.

A name slid out of his mouth. In truth, he wasn't at all surprised.

And at the same time he was remembering something that Mr. Bendricks had stressed, early on in the year. "Tragedy," he would say, thumping the blackboard with a chalk-dusty fist customarily used for thumping, "is the catharsis of pity and fear. It is defined as the catharsis of pity and fear."

Wade was proud to not have to be told what catharsis meant.

"It's got to have a reason," Mr. Bendricks would intone, peering about at the young faces in the room. "It's got to happen for a reason. If the princess just up and one day gets sick and dies, it would be sad—it wouldn't be tragic."

Kiki's makeup job had slid away into dust. She lived now with the wounds she had died with, and had Wade been the type to take auto shop, he would have known where the broken glass had penetrated, where the steering column had touched her heart.

—don't you love me?—

The words came from her mind, not her mouth, too bashed and broken to operate. The pouty lips had been ripped away, the glistening blood a twisted mockery of lipstick, a shade too bright. These were new wounds, fresh damages, won in a hard journey across cosmic realms beyond and up through two yards of aerated earth, between the old church graveyard and the cold core of the woods.

Look at me.

There were other new wounds, too, if Wade would take the time to look, and she was giving him that time. She had so much time now. One ankle was weak, and she was hobbling, arms flopping, tendril-like; the muscles had atrophied, and to lash at him had required whipping her shoulders about, like a beast shaking off a terrifying burden. A dirty pom-pom was hooked around a finger of her dangling left hand, to hold it in place; the balance of red and white in her ruined cheerleader sweater, rescued from her unfinal resting place, was falling sharply toward the former.

Look. At. Me.

Her once-proud chest heaved under the sweater. Weaker, deflated; half the air she took in would only rush out of a cavernous gash in her neck, some kind of gangrenous rot collecting around the edges.

Please just look at me.

Her formerly lustrous blonde hair was the worst, the saddest thing. ("Is it just sad, or is it tragic?", Mr. Bendricks would say, old Mr. Bendricks with his dusty hands and his burgundy sweater vests, good job Wade, keep it up.) Even in her life the mop of dead cells was the one thing everyone noticed first. The brilliant death had spread out of it now, the once-preserved luminance of sunny bayside dreamers turned to New England mud and seawater, strings of brown like faded clapboard; the scalp was giving way, the mane gone wild and uncollected, and falling out, or threatening to do so at any moment.

Wade picked here, hair, to look because it was the easiest to process, the easiest to understand. He righted himself, slowly, stood. Then he made the mistake of looking at her. Not at her body, at parts. But her, really her.

Framed by unpretty hair and a half-slashed face and a crushed jaw of breaking teeth were the saddest eyes Wade had ever seen.

They gave the game away, all by themselves. He could have told you in an instant whose eyes they were; he'd known the second they spotted him on the dirty forest floor. He knew their language, their moods: once curious, often playful, sometimes confused, always lost, now accusing.

"Kiki?!" Wade shouted, as if about to tell her she'd done something wrong.

Time broke again.

Somewhere in a car at the wrong time of night all the right things were happening for all the wrong reasons. The parking lot behind the drugstore in some other dimension on a different timeline. Wade felt warm flesh, imagined what he was about to do, to finally do it, to have that experience. He'd waited too long, and there would be peace now, if she would just shut up and relax; if he could just shut out that look in her eyes that was telling him, *no, something's wrong...*

Until now, he remembered the accusing eyes the best, in remembering them as the worst. Now he understood that there had been no strength behind that look, he had been afraid of a paper blood moon. This look was new, and urgent.

Help. Me.

And it came in ten thousand colors whipped together in sad and beautiful eyes and only that horrible, pleading look could make him understand.

She hadn't been trying to attack him just now, he got it now. She was just trying to get his attention. That's all she ever wanted, to get a guy's attention. Somehow it never worked out the way it should.

Kiki was bawling, devastated, seeing her torn and mangled body in the judging eye of a cheerleader's mind. Haunted tears rushed down the fallen angel face, mingling with thin blood and staining the soft white sweater. Their salt burned her wounds, and the more she cried the more it hurt, but she could only cry. She was too weak to scream.

Help me.

"Dude, I don't know what you want!"

And her punctured lungs could not find the breath to make it clear. She took a graceless step toward him. Thrust her shoulder up to make a limp arm point at him, briefly, the skin sliding off a hand he'd once held with a racing heart, the clawlike finger flopping out, indicating his general direction.

I thought you, I could trust... the only boy I could trust... for this.

And he saw everything now. Her last conscious clarity in the car, before her eyes closed, just for a moment, getting sleepy. Then the calm time in the dark, just her thinking about him. The way any other girl thinks about any other boy, in the soft moments before the dreams take her.

That's why it was you I could talk to... there had to be a reason.

And then something woke her up.

There's got to be a reason.

It was really a question.

And he didn't have an answer for her.

Another step. She was still instinctively swinging her hips, still trying to show off her butt, just so, just like Missy Zenerbell always did. Wade wondered if she was imagining what Missy Zenerbell or Cassidy Dale-Walters would say if they saw her like

this. It was the only thing he could dare to imagine that would contort her face into the silent howl it was stuck in. He knew it was worse, and he willed himself not to feel what he knew she was feeling, and the words ‘tormented creature’ ran through his mind.

And still she hobbled forward, still the squad’s little trooper, taking one for the team, giving a hundred and ten percent, fighting through the pain.

“Kiki, don’t—”

You told me I was beautiful.

“Kiki, stay away from me—”

Please. Make me feel beautiful again.

She pressed her hands to her stomach. Wailed, or tried to. Something wet and sticky oozed out of her and through her sweater, as if she was flattening a sponge. She retched, lifted up the sweater a few inches; a chunk of her waist was completely torn away, guts and fat spilling out the side. Kiki pawed at the empty space with wonder.

Please. Just get me out of this cow town. I have to get out of here.

“Kiki, I don’t understand!”

Please let me die.

She bobbed her head pathetically. A nasty crack came on her next step, and she fell, a bit. Wade could see something poking out of her punctured heel. Bloodstained bone. She teetered as she took the step that followed, ashamed. Patted down her skirt—Wade dared not guess at what was falling apart underneath. She ran her hands down her sweater, putting things right. Trying to make it all look nice.

The stench was overpowering.

He looked up, away from the blood-soaked ground, into the eyes bearing the unmistakable mark of someone who’s lost everything.

Please.

He looked back for moral guidance. That moron Aaron was still out for the count, ax and cash box by his side. Nope. Guess not. Nothing there.

Why won’t you look at me?

Wade wished he’d had the ax, in his hand, in that moment. It would make what he wanted to do an impulse, a forgivable, stupid, excusable human impulse. Kiki knew he had trouble with those.

He turned back. Vomit began to burble inside him. The beautiful butchered blonde was making a yeoman’s effort to step over a stump. Too close now.

There must be something wrong with me, whimpered Kiki’s voice in his head, defeated, inside him still, stumbling, weeping, clutching herself, rocking back and forth in shame, flooded with memories of happy summers, long-discarded grace, remembering the smile of a girl who never realized how beautiful she really was until she wasn’t.

That’s the tragedy.

“Kiki, you don’t want to do this—” Wade warned her.

You don’t know what I want to do. You don’t know what I want.

“Oh God! Aaron! Jesus! Fuck!”

Please love me, Kiki begged him, a hurt, a hunger in every word.

“Oh, God, somebody—”

You owe me that much.

That was it.

“Fuck you!” Wade shouted, kicking at nothing, and he threw himself down at the ax. It felt right, clutched in his hands; he knew as soon as he touched it that it was the right thing. “I didn’t do shit to you! Fuck you and leave me alone!”

He stood. Ax in hand.

She let her jaw dangle open, too far. Hissed as best as her decaying tongue would allow, little flecks of spit and blood and bile spilling from her maw. *Touch me, Wade.*

“I didn’t do nothing wrong! Go away!”

Make me. Make me feel beautiful.

“Fuck you, you fucking slut!” shouted Wade, feeling better than he’d ever felt about using the word in mixed company. He rattled his head, shook the sweat away, thought of his mother.

Make me feel good.

She used one useless arm to slap up at the other, to knock it up, to point at him. They were maybe ten steps apart now.

Do it. Put it in.

“I’ve never done nothin’ wrong! Fuck you!”

It’s what you wanted.

Next thing he knew the ax was in between her tits.

He didn’t remember running to her, didn’t remember clearing the stump, didn’t actually even remember bringing the ax up. He only came in at the moment of impact, getting her right in the chest, hoping to stop her heart to stop her mouth.

There was a splash, as his blade bashed right through the unsolid flesh, and then the feeling of stepping on a water balloon, and something erupted from the gash in her cleavage, and he got most of it, and that was all right with him.

Harder, Wade. Harder.

“No one’s gonna know! Ya slut! Ya fuckin’ whore!”

The ax stuck a bit as he yanked it out for the next swing, with the dull squeaky sound of rubber boots in old colony mud. He went for the head next, clumsily, not so much hacking as smacking, just putting another ugly dent in the face that used to smile at him in science. He didn’t mind that. The sound was the worst part anyway, and it drowned out the voice.

Faster. Put it in.

“Fuck you, slut!”

Harder.

He didn’t even know where his words were coming from. He just knew that it made him feel a whole hell of a lot better to hear himself talk as he did what she’d wanted him to do all along.

And there they were in the cold fog of a Fairfield County fall, the clean-cut kid and the cheerleader, their whole lives ahead of them. And he cut her and bashed her and beat her, and he spat on her and kicked her, and most of all he called her a whore over and over and over again until he believed it.

Another swing to the head. Clumsy again. Caught her across the high cheekbones with the blunt end. Then one to the arm, trying to take it off, just ripping a new gash, tearing away that omnipresent fucking sweater, taking a little skin with it, and that stupid cunt was still looking at him with those eyes, and he only knew one way to get her to look away.

And the hot blood felt good on his chest in the cold night air, and he grew to love the way her soft little body put up less and less of a fight each time, and the best part was, he knew he'd get to go home and look in the mirror and tell himself she was a worthless cocksucking little whore who had it coming. She deserved it. He had to be able to say that. She was asking for it the whole time.

I want you to die, you stupid Goddamn slut look what you've done to me.

And he kept at it, watching the horrible light and grief in the eyes begin to fade.

Please keep it up Wade I need you I need, I want it God I needed it oh God oh Mother, oh God please Wade please don't stop do it do it for both of us please—

He squinted through the haze, watching the eyes, looking for anything he could do to stop the pain. She was twisting her head around, the eyes straining toward heaven. He thought he knew why. She wanted to see it once, before the end.

Go Rebels, came the voice in his head.

And then the ax found the neck, and all of a sudden he didn't feel so cold any more.

"Fuck you!" Wade shouted, the muscles in his arms beginning to strain. "I want you to die! Die!"

"Oh, this is beautiful!" shrieked Aaron. He was laughing hysterically, doubled over. "Oh God, I wish I'd had my camera."

Wade blinked, let the ax fall. He looked over the damage he'd done to the old tree trunk. Maybe one good hit. A lot of bark chipped away. He surveyed his efforts with confusion, even a little dismay. He was sweating, panting.

He looked down at his hands. White. Clammy. Near-blistered from gripping the ax. But clean. He wiped them on his pants.

"Oh, this is good for the boy!" Aaron cackled, leaning against the cabin. "Oh, he needed this. You've been so tense lately. It's too much, too much."

Wade didn't know how to respond.

"You were so mad," Aaron continued. "You should have seen... you were so mad. I've never seen you so mad. 'Fuck! Fuck you, whore! Fuck!' Oh God! I nearly shit my pants."

Wade cast a wary eye over the tree in front of him, looking for blood, looking for haunted eyes. The only thing to see was a clumsy heart, carved ages ago, enclosing two sets of initials he didn't recognize. It told him that someone loved someone else, at one point or another.

"Oh God, I'm sorry," Aaron wheezed. "It was just, it was the funniest thing. I step out of the cabin, I say which way we should go, and then right then you come out and bonk your head on the fuckin' doorframe, bonk." He could barely force the words out between obnoxious chortles, as if 'bonk' was the funniest word in the language. "And then you just fuckin' flip out on this Goddamn tree like... oh Jesus I can't even describe."

Wade lowered the ax, carefully. Let himself laugh a bit, at himself. It felt good to laugh.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Aaron said, scooping the cash box up from the dirty forest floor, dusting it off. "You okay? Your head okay? These old buildings, man, people were short back then."

“Yeah, I’m all right,” said Wade, rubbing his hairline, looking for a bump. “My head’s... fine.”

“Geez. Fuckin’ come on, then. I think I see the lights, this way,” said Aaron, flinging his arm out, making a wild gesture.

“Right,” Wade agreed; he couldn’t see the light himself, but. “Let’s go.”

And he kissed two of his fingers, and pressed them to the letters in the tree. He didn’t know why.

Aaron was already on his way out, looking ahead, into mist. “Jesus, I think I even hear ‘em. Shouting, you hear that? The cheerleaders musta kicked in, just back there.”

Wade nodded, said nothing. Caught up to his best friend.

“Fuckin’ football... fuckin’ faggots.” They trod away. “That was too much,” declared Aaron. “This night, man.”

“Some day I’ll tell my grandchildren about it,” Wade agreed. He was in an agreeable mood.

For a moment he wanted to go back, to check out the old tree again. To really look at the initials in the old forgotten heart, memorize them, look ‘em up later. He could see himself already, looking for a face and a name in the old yearbooks. For the girl whose adolescent romance was commemorated in the forest of secrets. See if she ever got out of Red Corners, if she ever got married, had kids; if she ended up the person she wanted to be. But no; they were late for the game as is.

He decided not to worry about it. That girl probably ended up just fine, he decided; they were all gonna be just fine.