

This time, he knew, he would get completely away.

The blue line of trees, where he had been with the women, wavered and flowed, in watercolor blotches, and there was a dizziness high in his forehead. He closed his eyes and listened to his mad son babble, and he prepared, and made his plans.

When he opened his eyes, the road was empty in front of him. Jesse was gone: a streak, a flash: already gone.

It was as if he had never been there.

Buzbee narrowed his eyes and gripped the porch railing, squinted at the trees, scowled, and tried to figure another way out.

CATS AND STUDENTS, BUBBLES AND ABYSSSES



I got a roommate, he's tall and skinny, when we get in arguments he says "I went to Millsaps," uses the word like what he thinks a battering ram sounds like. He's a real jerk, I could break both his arms just like that! if I wanted to, I've got a degree in English Literature from Jackson State, I was the only white on campus, I can't use "I went to Jackson State" like a battering ram, but I can break both his arms. I got a doctorate, it took me three more years. I teach out at the junior-college—Freshman Comp, Heroes and Heroines of Southern Literature, Contemporary Southern Lit, Contemporary Northern Lit, that sort of crap. Piss-Ant studied geology, "pre-oil" he calls it facetiously, makes quite a ton of money, I swear I could tear an arm off his thin frail body and beat him over the head with it, I'm 5'6" tall, eighteen inches shorter than he but I'm thirty pounds heavier, an even 195, I played for the Tiges three years and can dead lift 700 pounds and run a marathon in under three hours six minutes.

I swear one of these days I'm gonna kill him, he may have gone to Millsaps ("Saps," he calls it, there, you hate him too) but he

doesn't know how to use a Kleenex. Instead he just goes around making these enormously tall wet sniffles, if you could hear just one of them you would first shiver and then you too would want to kill him. If they catch me and bring me to court I suppose I can always bring that up in the trial, I must go out and buy a tape recorder first thing tomorrow but first the cat needs feeding, he's a violent little sunuvabitch.

I will tell you about the cat after I tell you what I did in Arkansas.

Back when I was a hot-shot cruising timber for Weyerhaeuser I had seven hillbillies and a nigger working under me, I told them where to cut the big trees, diameter breast height and all that mess; I had lots of money then but I quit that job. I got tired of seeing all those trees falling. I'm poor now but at least I got the hell out of the tree-killing business. Perhaps I could do him in in his bed, while he slept. I could cut his throat with a razor, make it look like he had an accident shaving.

His name is W.C. He's the only thing I like about Jackson, Mississippi. He's a bad-ass: he only eats live pigeons. You know how cats can be finicky. I have to trap them for him under the interstate, off Fortification. The first time I was driving through Jackson I saw that street sign and about fell out of the car, I thought they had a street called Fornification. Everything has been sort of downhill since.

Nights, when I'm not lifting, I'm working on a fourth degree, in Computer Science, out at the junior college, all my colleagues know this and think I'm thinking about leaving for a better-paying job in a state not southern in nationality. This worries them, I can tell, especially Slater. They don't want me to leave, we generally have a pretty well-knit little group of us that drinks and parties and carries on and

bad-mouths the students together, none of the rest of the faculty lifts but despite this I am still a pretty well-liked guy, they think just because I keep a road map of Montana rolled up in my bottom desk drawer that that is where I want to go next.

Used to be people would only invite me over to their house when they were moving, to help them lift the refrigerator and the piano, you know, but would forget when it was time for the delicate stuff like waxing the cabinets or something, they'd invite damn near everybody except me. A person less sensitive than I might have been insulted, and left, moved away from the south. Not I. They just needed telling. In the noble West, where I used to live before I reached puberty, it was manly and virtuous not to tell people about yourself, but to let them find out. It made it better that way. But not in Mississippi. In the south, you were supposed to tell them. They held it against you if you didn't, because it meant you were trying to hide something from them, trying to deprive them of something more precious to them than food (which is plenty precious enough, the south has lots of pretty girls yes but there's a lot of awful fat ones too, oh well). I found out it was a mistake to deprive them of anything they could gossip about. Which is what you were doing if you didn't tell them about yourself. I mean everything: good, bad or indifferent. Tell all, do, do.

So.

Look here, I said when I had this figured out, figured out why they weren't inviting me to wax but instead only to move furniture. I am college educated. I have a degree from Jackson State. (I tried to say this like a battering ram.) Look here, I told them, I am a writer, almost.

They liked that. They started inviting me to wax cabinets, and other smart things. I was pleased. I had friends. I did not leave the south as others might have.

I did not tell you about that writing thing.

W.C. wouldn't like Montana. He'd freeze his ass off. But I don't tell them that: it is fun to think they think I'm thinking about leaving, and to tell me with knowing, understanding looks, to "hang in there" whenever we part company. They all think they know what I am going through, they think I hate the south like they do. It's not much but then not many places are. I know lots of people who have gotten brave and left, gone to Texas, California, South Dakota, and places like that. Many people are leaving the south.

The reason I room with a Piss-Ant is because he helps me pay for the rent. The reason I don't room with Slater is because he yells in his sleep—lashes out at the world, very loudly, curses and even wakes the neighbors sometimes. Shit! Shit! Damn! That kind of thing.

If you were wondering but were too shy to ask, then no, I've not had W.C. castrated, he's mean enough as it is, besides, I want to make sure there's as many of him around as possible. If all cats were like W.C. they wouldn't have a bad name, not at all. I keep a set of barbells up at my desk, and when students are reading or taking a test I sometimes do light pumping sets of Scott curls over the podium to keep my arms flushed. The wood creaks as I do this, a few of them look up occasionally and with interest but not many, they're mostly candy-asses and pansies, and are waiting for the scholarships to come through so they can go to Millsaps. W.C. would not like most of them.

Except for Robby. Robby is sort of my protégé. Even though I haven't ever done anything, he calls me his mentor. That's his only flaw, his only weakness: calling an unpublished writer his mentor, when any professor in the whole frothing world would have him on, but that's the kind of writer he is, or will be. He knows what he likes, and doesn't give a rat's ass about what anybody else thinks, he's a winner in every way but that one. Robby is not waiting for a scholarship to come through so he can go to Millsaps.

He sometimes comes over on weekends, drinks beer with me and Slater, we talk about girls, watch TV, cook a lot, we eat quite well. Slater used to be a poet, he's nothing now, and he sort of looks on Robby and me with awe because we aren't nothing yet, we haven't given up yet, awed at me because I'm thirty-one and haven't given up yet, and at Robby because he's young and has potential.

Most people stop wanting to be a writer around the age of sixteen.

We expect Robby is stuck with the curse for life.

He, Robby, hasn't really written anything yet, not any stories or anything like that, but he can write the hell out of a sentence. He writes some of the best I've ever read, it's just that they aren't ever about anything. It's like he gets tired easily. Sometimes it makes Slater's and my stomachs hurt, we want so badly for him to write a whole story.

If he ever gets untracked and is able to write a whole story or a book even, say six or seven *thousand* sentences about the same thing, then the big boys up in New York are going to go nuts about him. Where did this gem come from? they will ask.

Jackson, Mississippi, Slater and I will tell them. We taught him. Would you like any more just like him? we will ask, kind of snottily, as if they grow on trees down here.

Slater teaches poetry, jazz appreciation, and an occasional

humanities workshop. He smokes marijuana, even in the daytime, and has a beard.

Slater, too, hates Millsaps.

This is how we discovered Robby: we saw him walking down the hall one day with a copy of Henry James under his arm.

No one under thirty reads Henry James for no-good reason. Not unless they are interested in being a writer. Slater and I tailed him at a distance out to the parking lot, took down his license plate, and went back to the registrar's office with it. Found out where he lived, and went to visit him that night. Wore sports coats and tennis shoes, and took a six-pack of beer and W.C.

On his dresser, in his bedroom, Piss-Ant has this picture taken of him when he was a freshman in college, maybe the best he's ever looked. He's at some tight-ass social function, there are tablecloths on the tables and lots of people and the wineglasses are still empty and turned upside down on the tables, and Piss-Ant is sitting down in this picture, wearing an ascot and a shit-faced grin, looking somehow and for once very good in this picture, sitting down so no one can tell what a freak he is, and next to him is this absolutely dynamite woman, a real woman and not a girl. She's maybe twenty-five or twenty-seven to his nineteen, and she's wearing a sequiny dress with breasts spilling out all over the place, and her hair is sand-blonde, white almost, and there's lots of it; her hoop earrings are silver and glittering, Piss-Ant is grinning, he's so drunk his eyes are crossed, and he's got his arm around this piece of heaven, she's grinning too, laughing even, you can see her teeth even, she's laughing so much. . . .

She's got to be his mother, his sister, a cousin, a whore, something. . . . She can't just be his date for that night. He's too much of a Piss-Ant.

I didn't tell you this but when he talks he sounds like the recording of a deep-voiced Iranian talking through a long hollow cardboard tube played at 17 rpm instead of 33. Like he's about to run out of batteries at any time. Like what everything he has to say is just between you and him, something he's found out through his own incredible knowledge but is going to let you in on it too. He can say "I'm going to go to the bathroom" and make it sound like he expects everyone to stop what they are doing and record the event in some sort of black notebook or diary. Slater and I sure do hate that picture.

I guess the most weight I've ever lifted is the back end of Slater's car. Robby and Slater and I took it up to Oxford to look at Faulkner's old house out in the country one Sunday. We got sort of lost and got sort of stuck in the mud. We had a couple dozen watermelons and a keg of beer in the back, it was a hot Mississippi summer, we were going to have a picnic, and the jack sank down in the mud and got lost, but I lifted the back end up anyway, as if all that beer and watermelon weren't in the back seat at all, and Slater and Robby tossed sticks and rocks under the tires and then I let it back down and we got inside, muddy as hell, and drove out of it, went on our way, off to picnic.

We'd bought the watermelons six-for-a-dollar in Neshoba County. We love a good deal. We got drunk and never did find Faulkner's old house, but it didn't matter. We had a great time and drove back down the Natchez Trace going about 20 mph and came creeping in around dawn and I came in still drunk and pissed in the cup Piss-Ant keeps by the side of his bed to keep his false teeth in, and then pretended to try to flush them by turning the lamp on and off, like I thought it was the toilet. "Ohrrroth," Piss-Ant said in the hollow Yankee toilet-tube voice,

which is how he says "oh, no," when he found out. Slater and Robby and I laughed hard and long about it till we were in cramps, at lunch the next day.

I don't know if I told you this or not, Piss-Ant wears false teeth, he's twenty-seven but he's been wearing them ever since he was twenty-four, which is how old he was when I knocked them all out.

Another time we tried to get Robby a girlfriend. Slater's divorced twice, with three kids and alimony payments, can't afford women anymore, and I scare them, this is fine with me, piss on them anyway if they don't like the way I shout and yell and rage and roar when I lift weights, what do I care if they don't like this, who needs them anyway? I'm not going to give up my lifting for anyone, besides my back is as hairy as an animal's, like a pelt, they don't like that either, but so what, I piss on them all from a considerable height, but Robby, he is different, he is young, he's good-looking too, he needs one, only he thinks they'd take up all his time, time he needs to be spending writing, you can see this great gulp slide up in his throat when he sees one is getting serious about him, you can see his eyes widen. He is forever getting up and leaving the room early at parties, and afterwards all the single girls ask about him, and Slater and I will go drive by his apartment after the party, drive by slowly, and almost no matter what time it is, we will see his second-story light on, and know he is in there at his desk writing some more of those damn fine sentences, with maybe a half-empty bottle of wine on his desk, that's all he drinks, white wine, at age twenty he's already become something of an alcoholic, that's why we were trying to find him a girlfriend, same thing only not as rough on the body, but we weren't having a lot of luck.

So we went home and fed W.C. a pigeon and got a six-pack

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out of the refrigerator and then after we had cleaned the feathers up we sat down in the den and thought about it. Piss-Ant was not in; he'd gone home to Gulfport for the weekend, and was visiting his mother or some damn thing. It was after midnight. Slater is dangerous after midnight.

We thought and drank beer for about an hour. I had to get another six-pack out. It was like a genius was in my living room when Slater mentioned Maribeth Hutchings.

Maribeth Hutchings had been in one of my contemporary lit classes about five years ago. She was a little older than Robby, but that wasn't important. What was important was this: Maribeth had an uncle who was a writer. A real writer. He'd written three books, one of them had won an award even, and then he'd moved to Montana to write.

Another desperate Southerner, done escaped at his first chance.

Maribeth didn't write, but no matter: we could tell Robby she did. We'd never talked about it but we knew Robby well enough to know this: that if he did by some slip of self-discipline allow himself to become interested in a girl, she would have to be a writer herself, or at least be related to one.

It took us about three days to track this writer's niece down; when we found her, she was an accountant for an oil company.

She still entertained no thoughts of writing. She liked numbers. She was pleased by money, and the camaraderie of office life. We saw the diploma in her office. Noticed, regrettably, that she had finally ended up going to Millsaps. But Slater and I looked at each other. These things can be overcome, Slater's eyes said. I nodded. She was about twenty-six years old. She was beautiful. She was making about \$70,000 a year. We sat down and told her our plan. We had even brought a picture of Robby, and a Big Chief tablet with some of his better sentences typed out on it, numbered one through ten, like commandments.

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She glanced impatiently at the list, then asked us to leave. I do not think she liked number six, the one about the dry leaf that blows hollow and forlorn down the empty canyon. We left.

So Robby remained hornate. No nooky for him, not till he becomes an accomplished writer: that's his unspoken vow, we can tell. He's friendly enough around us, he snatches up our b.s. about writers and writing like a man starved for the Secret, and he is all nose-to-the-grindstone and give-'em-hell damn-the-torpedoes when he sets about trying to write some more of his good sentences, but sometimes Slater and I have seen him alone on campus, walking, carrying his writing notebook in his arms, looking down at his feet as he walks, and he'll not know we're watching him, won't be aware anyone is watching him. He'll have this unGodly fierce scowl on his face—we're sure he doesn't realize it, he's not a mean student—and we'll know what he's thinking about, and we'll know how his stomach is turning around inside and how he just wants to slam his books down on the sidewalk and thrust his arms up in the air and roar at the heavens till the clouds shatter and fall submissively in broken tinkling jigsaw pieces to the ground.

Like I said, Slater does it every night, in his sleep.

It's like there's this shell over Robby, this confining, restricting, elastic-like bubble; it's like he's got to write his way out of it.

Robby backs up, writes a sentence, writes two good sentences, hurls himself at the bubble, but the sentences aren't good enough, he bounces back, maybe lands on his butt. He gets up, dusts himself off, picks up his books, writes another sentence, hurls himself, bounces back, falls again. . . .

It's frustrating as hell, I'll tell you; at Robby's age, and with his talent and potential, it's pure hell.

Most of us get used to the bubble finally, just ignore it, and quit

bouncing against it, cease to hurl ourselves recklessly against the thing, and settle for moving around cautiously within its limits as best we can.

Only at night, asleep, or sometimes when we have been drinking too much, do we ever dream about how clean and crisp the air tastes on the outside of that bubble, and how for many years we labored to taste that air; only in our dreams do we ever reach for it now: asleep, or drunk.

But Robby's still young: he's imagining that he's suffocating. He thinks he's got to get into that air outside the bubble or die. He thinks it's like a curse.

He's right, in a way, but the curse of it is this: it's not death that will come if he is unable to break out of the bubble, but something worse. He will continue to live.

Usually I get pretty sick of grading papers in my Freshman Comp class. I usually don't even do it; I just throw them away, and tell the students I'm still looking at them, really pondering over them and will probably have to return them in the mail next semester or something. I've got about a dozen bushels of them wadded up in the attic, I bring them down and use them to start the fires in the fireplace with each winter, good God they are awful, I sometimes read a page or two as I unrumple them and feed them to the fire; they make my stomach cramp and my breath come fast and shallow. *Piss-Ant* says I am irresponsible and maybe I am, but let me tell you these papers are awful. Having Robby write here amongst the students at the j.c. is like turning a cave man loose in the Stone Age with a real steel sword, can you imagine the luxurious piggishness it would afford him, the only one in a world still made of stones? Robby is a steel sword among stones. Invincible.

To the extent that a sword will take you. The editors up north

aren't yet impressed with Robby, and Slater and I can't really blame them, for it's stories people like to read, not just sentences, but one of these days he is coming out of that bubble, he will come slashing his way out of it like a claw-taking demon, like an axe-wielding barbarian, and then people will know about him and he will become one of Them. Robby Starkley, writer. Not author, but writer.

If he can hang tough, He's only twenty.

We try to steer him away from stories of Anne Tyler, who won the Anne Flexner Creative Writing Prize at Duke and graduated when she was nineteen, who had published two novels by the time she was twenty-four. Of John Irving, who spent three years polishing his first novel at the Writers' Workshop in Iowa before finally having it published at the advanced age of twenty-five.

John Gardner spent fifteen years flinging himself against the bubble before he got out. He's dead now, of course, died three Septembers ago, it killed him, getting out did, but at least he did get out.

But still, we wish he'd get a girlfriend, a really beautiful one, elegant even, something to buffer the sting a little in case he doesn't make it, or at least a pal to bum around with his own age, instead of running around with two old ex-writers all the time. It's like he's sacrificing the present: it's like he's gambling everything on the future, and if he misses, he'll suddenly look up and be thirty-five or forty and there won't be a thing behind him: nothing but an empty, gaping abyss. He'll fall back into it.

Bubbles, abysses . . . I think about these things a lot, worry about Robby a little every day. God how I want him to make it. In the summers, Slater and W.C. and I often drive down to

the coast for a day, and lie out on towels on the beach in the sand under the sun smelling of coconut and wear sunglasses, and drink cold beer with sand grains stuck on the wetness of the cans and sit up sometimes with one elbow propped and watch the girls, and listen to the cries of seagulls and the sound of the waves and the big fancy radios and generally do nothing all day. W.C. chases hermit crabs, hides in the sea oats and watches people, and it's really all right.

Slater lashes out at the world in his dreams, at night, and in the day, alone in an empty room with mirrors, I lift heavy weights again and again until my eyes swim in black pools of pain and gold flashes streak through my arms and shoulders.

And Robby writes.

In my own dreams at night, and rehearsing in front of the mirror, this is sometimes what I feel like telling Piss-Ant when I see him come driving up in the piss-ant little MG with the top down and a pretty girl in the seat. Do not think I could not have studied pre-oil myself, you little bastard, do not think either Slater or myself could not have studied it and gotten a job in it and done damn good, because we could have, you brown-nosing candy-assing death-loving piss-anting bubble-bound little coward.

We try to keep Robby away from Piss-Ant as much as possible.