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The GOOD SON

A NOVEL

Craig Nova

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BOOK I

Chip Mackinnon

North Africa. 1942

My father is a coarse, charming man, a lawyer, and a good one, and when I was flying over the desert and the German pursuit pilot began pouring round after round into my plane (a P-40), I was thinking of how I learned to drive, and how it affected my father. The desert sky was beautiful, the bleached color you sometimes see in blue glass that has rolled up on the beach. There were pillars of smoke here and there and some fires, too, which were made pale by the sun. If I had been shooting down the German, I imagine I would have been just as zealous. I wonder what kind of car he learned to drive, a Mercedes or Dusenberg perhaps: I learned to drive a Buick.

My father's chauffeur was named Wade, and although it took a while, we became friends and went to the movies together. I liked Wade for a number of reasons, not the least of which was a sense of mystery about him. When I was young I was impressed by the knowledge that Wade had been in prison (in Wyoming), but when I got a little older I realized it wasn't the prison that made him mysterious so much as an un-named, but finally discovered regret. He understood regret. After we became friends we started going to the movie theater in a small town near where my father owns a piece of land on the Delaware River (a piece of which land and a house built for my dead brother I now own). The theater was not very large and the seats were shaggy with stuffing and sometimes Wade and I

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would be the only people there, staring at that screen which had a hole in the upper right hand part. The hole looked like a bat.

Wade was thirty-five when he started to work for my father, and he was a tall, thin man, with a long nose and chin, pale, tea-colored eyes. He favored a dark green sweater worn over an undershirt when he wasn't working. At other times he wore the blue trousers and jacket my father required of him. On weekends, when I was home from school, Wade drove my father and me to that land on the Delaware. Wade was a little nervous, but this was not unusual, considering the man for whom he had to work.

I like to think of the land as it is in the fall, when the leaves are gone and you can see the woods, the fieldstone that projects from the ground like the prows of speedboats, the greenish park-statue color of the lichen. We drove along the Delaware for a while and then turned where the Mongaup River passed under the highway. The ground was scaled with leaves of red and brown. We climbed a road that went through the trees and finally stopped in front of a two story clapboard house that had shutters which were painted black. There was a front porch and an elm tree before it and my father used to like to sit on the front porch and drink a mint julep. There's a new road on the land now, one that's a little straighter and doesn't wash out so easily. My father made it himself with a bulldozer he bought as army surplus. The machine was a bargain and it was still painted green. There are both cow and sheep barns, although there is no silo. The cow barn has been made into a garage with an apartment (where Wade stayed) and another outbuilding has been fixed too so that the housekeeper and her husband had their privacy.

I learned to drive in 1936 and the car was a Buick, a new one. It was black and had comfortable seats covered with a fuzzy material. The Buick had a three-speed transmission with the gearshift on the floor. The starter was on the floor, too. The paint was waxed and

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kept pretty much spotless, and the car had whitewall tires. Usually, when my father and I got into the backseat, after having come from the apartment in New York (in which there was an imitation Mexican garden, complete with terra-cotta tiles), my father said, “Wade, now we’ll begin the process of drinking and driving, slowly along.” He made Wade stop at every bar on the road, where my father drank quickly and alone. About halfway to the farm he started smoking cigars (actually you could call them “seegars” because that’s what they smelled like, and he wouldn’t have the windows open, either). My father enjoyed the odor. I didn’t, though, and just like clockwork, about three quarters of the way to the farm, I’d get sick. These trips were usually made at night, on Friday, and my father and I sat together in the backseat. My father bore a striking resemblance to W. C. Fields, although I don’t think my father was as funny. In any case, in the spring before I learned to drive, I can remember sitting in the backseat beside my father, watching his beanbag nose, his profile against the passing lights of other cars. I began to squirm. The backseat was filled with smoke. “Wade,” said my father, flicking an ash onto the floor, “Wade, stop the car. The boy’s going to puke.”

Wade stopped the Buick. Usually, I was able to get out of the backseat myself, but there were times when I was already gagging, and then my father opened the door, held the cigar in one hand, and helped me into the gutter or drainage ditch at the side of the road. My father enjoyed his cigar while I vomited. One night, just before I decided to learn how to drive, I was kneeling in the drainage ditch and I looked up and saw the Buick against the passing lights, saw its monstrous, high, silky shape, and the open back door, out of which came the bluish smoke of the cigar. My father didn’t look at me, and Wade didn’t either. Wade was a polite man. On this particular night, when I could see that phantom of the Buick, when I could taste the bile and acid while I was kneeling in the ditch (I think it

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was filled with some daisies and Queen Anne's lace: there was some gentle, lingering odor there), my father said, "You done?" I shook my head and heaved again, and then I climbed into the back of the car, the skunky odor there. My father must have paid a fortune for those cigars, too: he said they were made by blind men in Cuba, and I guess this was true, because the men who made them didn't always know what they were putting inside. I sat next to my father and he reached over and closed the door.

"Stop at the next bar, Wade," he said, his voice thumping like a drum, even though he wasn't that big, really. "I need a drink."

I can still name, in order, those roadhouses and taverns and saloons where my father stopped to drink. Wade and I sat in the Buick.

"How's school?" said Wade.

"Good," I said, still tasting the sour vomit.

"That's good," said Wade. "Education is what you need."

"Yes," I said.

A few years before, when Wade began to work for my father, our conversations stopped here, but after a month or so, Wade said, "Do you mind if I ask you a question?" and I said, "No," and he said, "What the hell was the Battle of Hastings?" I gave him my schoolboy's knowledge, and he nodded with a sincere reverence. There were words and phrases, events, things that he heard in conversation or saw in the paper, and he didn't know where to go to find out about them, and he had been ashamed to ask anyone his own age. So after we went through the Battle of Hastings in the parking lot, we moved onto other subjects, although I'm sure I failed him on many occasions, since I really didn't have much to say about the Manichaean Heresy, the Papacy at Avignon, the Boxer Rebellion (it is a small triumph, however, that Wade understands that the Boxer Rebellion had nothing to do with Madison Square Garden). I did give a fair account of quadratic equations, geology,

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Mount Everest, and Middle English (of which I recited a few lines, "The Wife of Bath"). After I had given it, Wade said, "Chip, you wouldn't put me on, would you? You wouldn't pull Wade's leg, now? Because that doesn't sound like English at all. That sounds like the talk of, you know, someone who's taken leave of his senses." "No," I said, "I'm not fooling you. Maybe it's my accent." Geography was our great triumph, and we played a game with it. I'd say "America," which ends in "A," and then Wade would have to say "Alaska," and then I'd have to say "Amsterdam," and then he'd have to say "Manchuria." Wade loved this game, and we'd play it when we sat in the parking lots while my father filled his gut with bourbon.

It was after we first played this game that Wade suggested we go to the movies in a small town near the farm. He had lost, being caught by St. Croix, not knowing of the existence of X Rock, Antarctica; Xenia, Ohio; or the Xie River; but he was not ashamed, and I was fairly sure he was in the market for a *National Geographic Atlas*, if only for the index. He suggested we go the next night, and we did, with me still in the backseat of the Buick and Wade driving. After we had seen our first movie, I sat up front, and we weren't so awkward anymore. We saw many movies. Wade sat next to me in the dark, with a box of stale popcorn and a bottle of cheap liquor in a paper bag, his eyes set on the screen. He couldn't stand missing a minute, not one frame, although if the picture were very bad, he didn't mind if I went to the lobby and read the day-old paper that was there. The seats in the theater were usually ankle-deep in trash, popcorn boxes, and candy bar wrappers, and Wade smoked his cigarettes in the middle of the movie, or continuously when he wasn't eating the popcorn or sipping from the bottle in the bag. He started a fire one night, and the manager had to put it out with a fire extinguisher that made a whitish foam. Wade apologized for starting the fire, but then stepped over the row of seats in front of us with his

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long legs, sat down, and continued to watch. The manager wanted to throw him out, but then he saw me, and knew that my father had a new chauffeur, and thought the better of it. My father made quite substantial political contributions and everyone wanted to run for the town's only salaried (and otherwise lucrative) job, that of superintendent of roads.

Wade and I went to the movies whenever we could, and we saw some terrible ones, which troubled me, if only because they didn't trouble Wade. It was not a matter of entertainment for Wade, or so it seemed. During the particularly bad ones I no longer went to the lobby and looked at the old paper, but instead watched Wade, his eyes set on the screen, his papered bottle rising and falling, his hands lighting the cigarettes and dropping the still burning matches. In those days I favored pirate films, with lots of swinging from ropes. One night there was a historical epic. In it there was a scene in a Middle Eastern harem, which had twenty-five or so women dressed in spangled tops and sultan's trousers (tight at the ankle). Wade's eyes were wide and unblinking but he stopped the bottle halfway to his lips and dropped the box of popcorn. He stared at a small, dark, attractive woman who was lounging before some man with a headdress. She looked quite appealing. Then the scene changed and Wade went back to sipping the bottle, although he didn't pick up the popcorn. After the film was over, and we were back in the car, Wade said, "Chip, that was a good film." I didn't say anything, and I forgot about the dark woman with the small lips. She turned up again, though, in a western, and Wade watched her carefully. After she left the screen, Wade took a hard pull from the bottle. He looked at me, and saw my curious expression, but we didn't speak about it. Now I never went to read the papers and could not have been dragged from the theater, since I was also looking for the "extra," that dark, taut woman with the small lips and who had above one eye a slight distortion that might have been

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caused by a scar. It gave her face that slight asymmetry, the touch of the freakish, which makes a woman beautiful rather than pretty. I was looking for her if only to discover the reason she had such an effect on Wade. The closest we ever came to speaking about the woman was the one time I said, "Look. It says here a cast of thousands. That looks good, doesn't it?" Wade said "Yes" and went to the liquor store to buy a bottle in a sack.

On the night I decided to learn to drive, Wade and I sat for a while in the parking lot of a roadhouse and then Wade turned in his seat and said "Morocco?" (which isn't too far from where the German pursuit pilot came up on my tail and began putting round after round into my P-40) and I said "Orinoco" and he said "Oregon" and then my father came out of the bar, his mood not much improved by the bourbon.

We continued until we came to my father's favorite part of the road, a piece about two miles long: it was cut into a cliff above the Delaware. The road wasn't much to speak of. Straight up on one side, straight down on the other, and it was crooked, filled with sharp turns, because the cliff wasn't smooth. There were a couple of guardrails, old ones made of planks that wouldn't stop a man on a bicycle, at the places where the road turned toward the precipice and the river below. One of these guardrails looked like a broken clotheshorse: a drunken policeman had gone through it while chasing a speeder.

When we came to this section of road Wade began to twist in his seat and finally my father said, "Wade, stop the car. I'll take it through the turns. You get in the back with the boy."

Wade stopped the Buick. You could see the beginning of the cliff ahead, the receding and twisting road much farther on: it was as though the first turn were a sound, a shout, and the other turns echoes of the first. Wade got out of the car and peered down at the river, which could be seen well from where he stood, although his

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perspective was more like one you'd have if you were looking at the river from an airplane. You could see the silken and roily water through the mist that was just above the surface. Wade stared at it, and got into the backseat.

"Are you going to puke anymore?" my father said. "Because if you are, you better do it now. We're not stopping until we're on the other side. I don't want a mess in the car."

Wade had his hands clasped together and he was squeezing them between his knees. He was trembling hard.

"No," I said, "I'm through. I won't make a mess."

"Well," said my father, "thank God for small favors."

My father put the Buick into gear, turned on the high beams, and began. The gas pedal was down to the floor.

"Chip," said Wade, "we're going to die."

There was a section of road before the first turn, a piece about three hundred yards long, and it was straight. My father called it the "chute." The Buick began rocking a little from side to side as my father slapped the gearshift lever from first to second and from second to third.

My father grunted as we went into the first turn. It wasn't so bad, because it turned inward, toward the cliff, rather than toward the river. It was the river turns that got to Wade and me, too, and those were of course the turns my father lived for. I was glad it was night, because you could see cars coming in the other direction. I saw my father's round head, his shoulders, and his arms gripping the wheel in black silhouette against the lighted and moving landscape (or against the moving wall of fieldstone when we turned away from the river and the lighted air when we turned toward it). The Buick went through the first turn without skidding. My father had the seat adjusted so that he was able to straighten his arms from his shoulder to the wheel, and this is the way he drove through the

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turns, only taking his right hand from the wheel when he had to shift. By the time we were in the third turn the Buick had begun to drift, and Wade rocked back and forth, still holding his hands between his knees.

"You've got to straighten out the curves, Wade," said my father. He meant by this that he didn't go around each turn while staying on his side of the road, but by following a route that went from one side of the road to another: it made for less turning, and he could go faster that way. Wade groaned. This advice about "straightening the curves" changed to "straightening the bends" after my father had gone to England. Anyway, after giving us the theory, he remained silent, being intent on the car, the way it drifted from side to side, the alternating visions of sheer granite and foggy air. The Buick smelled of cigars and liquor and Wade's dread. My father was silent with one exception, which was when Wade began to mumble (prayers or quiet entreaties in which my father's name was occasionally audible).

"I didn't ask for your advice," said my father.

He continued driving. I imagined the car crashing through the guardrail and flying (like an airplane without wings) over the river. Then my father would say, while still struggling with the wheel and shifting down as the engine raced, "Son of a bitch. We're going Democratic." On this particular night my father didn't get to give his political impressions while in a Buick which was on its way into the Delaware, because he went through the last turn with the car almost out of control, and then slowed down, pulled over, and put on the hand brake. He sighed, flicked some cigar ashes onto his pants, and said, "Wade, you can take it from here."

Wade opened his eyes and looked around and saw me, with my eyes so wide open I felt them getting dry.

"Chip," said Wade, "I should quit this job."

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My father turned and looked over the seat and spoke with the cigar in his mouth. He sounded as if he were under water or beneath a pillow.

"Wade," he said with half a smile (the other half being taken up with the cigar). "You been in the slams, Wade. And you're too honest to lie about it, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Wade, stiffening a little, but still shaking. "Yes, I was incarcerated."

"Times are hard, Wade," said my father.

He was a customs lawyer and the Depression hadn't done so much to him as it had to others. My father was drinking a mint julep and thinking about fishing trips when his colleagues and acquaintances were throwing themselves out of windows and sucking at exhaust pipes or filling their skulls with bird shot: this improved my father's disposition, but in a way that could only be appreciated by himself. Wade had been locked up for stealing, in Cheyenne, Wyoming, ten miles of the telephone company's wire, which he then tried to fence through a plumber, who was smart enough to see that the phone company's reward was less than the price of the wire, but more than could be had for it on the market, especially since there was only one customer, and that was the phone company.

"Yes," said Wade, with a certain resignation and knowledge, too, of how hard times can be: as hard as the stone out of which penitentiaries are made. He had, for a moment, the wide-eyed expression I usually saw on his face at the movies.

My father got into the backseat, and Wade stalled the engine (in his nervousness and fatigue) before getting the Buick back on the road.

"I'm going to have a mint julep," said my father, "just as soon as we get to the house."

I was tired of this section of the road. In the middle of the

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previous winter, after I'd been sick in a culvert that was filled with new snow, and after my father had stopped at more than his usual number of bars (or at least had more than his usual amount of bourbon, because the number of bars couldn't be increased), we came to the turns.

"Wade," said my father, "stop the car. I'll drive."

It was still snowing and the road hadn't been plowed. The flakes were large wet clumps rather than separate pieces: they looked like soapy foam.

"Mr. Mackinnon," said Wade. "I know you like to drive this piece, but I think tonight it isn't such a good idea."

My father got out of the car and stood in the snow.

"I'll drive, Wade," he said.

My father was slowly describing a large circle with his head. He was slapping at the snowflakes, too, mistaking them, I guess, for moths.

"Get in the back with the boy," said my father.

He opened the door, but Wade climbed out on the other side and then got into the back with me.

"I just need a little cold air on my face," said my father as he climbed in behind the wheel and rolled down the window.

"We've just been lucky, that's all," said Wade.

"Father," I said, "I don't think this is such a good idea."

"I'll ask for your opinion when I want it," said my father.

The Buick took off. The headlights played on the snow, and it looked as though all of the flakes, the white bits, were coming from one place and that we were headed straight for it. The Buick hit the stone wall on the right-hand side of the road, just before we came to the spot where my father usually said, "Wade, you can take it from here." The car seemed light for a moment, and my father's arms moved back and forth at the wheel which no longer offered any resistance. "Son of a bitch," said my father as we slid from one

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side of the road to the other, swinging from guardrail to bluestone (which was cracked by springs that ran even in winter so it was covered with large, sloppy carrots of ice) and Wade kept saying, "This is it. Chip, this is it after all." I felt dizzy and strangely constricted and without coordination (quite similar, actually, to the way one feels when the airfoil and control surfaces and cables of one's airplane have been stitched by a 20 mm cannon, especially if one is convinced the shells from the cannon have proximity fuses) as the car moved one way and then the other and finally into the drainage ditch next to the bluestone wall: it was like a crash landing in the Arctic. The icicles and snow went into the air and you heard the ice crack and squeak as the car went through the crystalline stalactites and into the wall itself. There was the unmistakable sound of the bumper and the fender grinding against stone. The car continued scraping along the wall, knocking the frozen, carrotlike icicles into the air, some of which fell in the road, and some of which landed on the car. The rear end of the Buick began to swing away from the wall (and toward the river) when the front end hit a piece of bluestone squarely. Wade said, "Goddamn you, Mackinnon."

"Don't be a fool," said my father. "If you're going to be familiar, call me Pop."

The Buick came to a stop. A beautiful cloud of steam, silky and wet, rose from the radiator. There were bits of snow falling in the light from the one headlamp that wasn't broken. The windshield was cracked and in the center there was a glassy spider web. The steam looked like billows of a white parachute. When I thought of the silky dampness (while I was over the desert) it reminded me of the time I first touched a woman's satin evening gown on which champagne had been spilled. My father ground the starter and the engine turned over without catching until the battery went dead.

My father got out of the Buick and stood in the snow, while

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looking at the front end in the dim light of one headlamp. The snow fell on his bald head. He opened the hood and stared at the dark interior, in which you could hear the hissing sound of snowflakes as they landed on the overheated engine.

"Son of a bitch," he said, now standing in the dim, yellowish light again. "You can't get much more Democratic than that."

He looked in the window at us as though we were the contents of a package given to him by his worst enemy. It was my first automobile crash and although I was a little sick, I had enjoyed the smashing of the fender and the breaking of glass. My arm was sore, but I don't remember how it got that way, and my knees were watery.

"Some crash, huh, Wade?" said my father. He slapped the roof of the Buick and put his head back and laughed.

"I've been fired for less," said Wade.

"Ha!" said my father. He hit the roof of the Buick and laughed some more. Wade started to chuckle.

"Chip," he said. "At least I won't have to drive your father around for a week or so. Not until they fix the car. That may not seem like much, but to a man in my position it's a great deal."

I rolled down the window.

"You don't look hurt," said my father, whose head was now covered with snow. "I guess you aren't."

"No," said Wade, "I don't think we're hurt."

"Chip?" said my father.

"No," I said.

"How are we going to get to the farm?" said Wade.

"We're going to walk it," said my father.

Wade looked at his street shoes. My father wore galoshes, since he wanted to be comfortable when he walked from the Buick to the bars. I was wearing street shoes like Wade's. We had coats, and we

put them on, and then took our suitcases from the trunk. My father switched off the ignition and shoved a knob on the dashboard. The snowflakes seemed to go out.

We started in single file, my father in front and me in the rear. We carried our suitcases as we walked in the snow. There was about six inches of it, anyway. All you could hear was the *quash, quash, quash* of our feet and the distant rush of the Delaware. It was cold, and the snow was sticking.

"My feet are snug," said my father, "how about yours?"

Wade sighed.

We walked down to the Mongaup and over the bridge there. The water looked dark and slick against the snow on the bank and on the stones and bits of driftwood, the junk washed up in the spring flood. My teeth were chattering so much it sounded like someone shaking dice in a leather cup. Wade groaned. We started up the road to the farm, which is about two miles from the Mongaup.

We kept climbing and finally we could see the lights of the house. There's a road that comes through a pine grove and then passes through a gate and turns and goes up to the house and barn. We went to the porch and my father opened the door and stood in the hall, letting the snow melt from his shoulders and suitcase and head onto the floor. It was made of planks and they were pegged. The housekeeper, who always wore white dresses (as though she were a nurse, and which probably revealed her attitude toward the family) came from the back of the house and saw my father standing there like something abandoned in a storm. Wade and I stood slightly behind him, and each of us carried a suitcase. All of the suitcases were covered with melting snow. The housekeeper waited until she saw the first drops from our clothes, from my street shoes and Wade's and from my father's galoshes, and then she went upstairs.

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In a moment my mother appeared in her dark skirt, which came all the way down to her ankles. She wore a white blouse and had on a dark sweater, too. Her prematurely gray hair was worn in a bun. Before the war she was not pretty, but she was not old. Her skin was smooth and her hair was thick. Her voice was deep and it had a reassuring breathiness and timbre, which I usually noticed in movie stars or women who are beautiful enough to be indifferent. She had a large nose and high, full cheeks.

"It's good to be home," said my father as he dropped his suitcase in its puddle and put his cigar into the corner of his mouth. The cigar wasn't lit and the housekeeper stared at the puddle.

"What happened?" said my mother. Her tone was not gentle, but it was not angry, either: she always seemed to be asking for the facts of the matter, or for the presence of necessity. I could almost hear her say, Is this the way things are done? Is it? And is it necessary?

"What happened?" she said, after my father had been standing there for a moment with the cigar in the corner of his mouth. His cheeks were full, as they usually were when he was thinking.

"Nothing," he said. "Wade had an accident. Wasn't bad."

Wade had turned out the door and was bending over his small bag (which usually contained a toothbrush, comb, a change of underwear, a shirt, three or four extra pairs of socks, and some magazines filled with dirty pictures) when he heard my father. He came back inside, shaking his head, not so much in denial as in disbelief. He brought the bag with the extra socks and the dirty pictures with him and held it in front of his knees with both hands.

"Mr. Mackinnon . . ." said Wade.

"I'm not firing you for it. . . ." said my father.

My mother glanced outside and saw that the snow was still falling. The storm looked like the white petals of apple blossoms in springtime: the white bits fell gently onto the porch.

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"It's a hard storm," said my mother, "that explains it . . . Wade."

"Yes," said my father, looking at me. I was quiet. It was our first secret. Wade still held the bag and stuttered when he tried to speak.

"No, Mis-mis-mis-Mac-mac-mac . . ." he said.

"Mackinnon," said my father. "At least you didn't panic. I guess that's worth something. A good thing in a man. I appreciate it, Wade, and I'm giving you a raise. Five dollars a week."

My mother was suspicious, but there was on her face that question: What happened? and Why? Is there something here I do not understand? and What can I do about that?

Wade turned to my mother and said, "Mrs. Mackinnon, I . . ."

"All right!" said my father. He looked like a black barrel and his voice sounded like it came from the bottom of one. "Ten dollars."

All the snow had melted and we were wet. My mother watched us carefully.

"Ten dollars is a lot of money, Wade," said my father, "especially for a man with history. . . ."

The water ran down my neck. Wade stared before him, at nothing, as he stood under the light in the hall.

"Take it," I said.

Wade turned his sad, tea-colored eyes on me, on my father's full face with the cigar in the corner of his mouth, on my mother's inquisitive expression, and said, "All right. Ten dollars," and then took his bag with the socks and the dirty photographs and walked through the snow to his apartment over that cow barn which had been turned into a garage.

"You don't look hurt," said my mother.

"I'm not," said my father, "neither is Chip. Good highland stock." He touched himself on the chest. "Although Chip's is probably a little diluted . . ."

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"You dragged him through the snow in those shoes?" said my mother.

"He walked it himself," said my father as he slowly went into his study, which was off the hall before the door. It was a room my mother called the "parlor." There was a fireplace in it and the fire had been set. My father took off his coat and sat in a chair next to the fender and said, "Some things can't be helped."

I walked outside and up the stairs over the garage where Wade had his apartment. There was a light on. I tapped on the doorframe.

"Come in," said Wade.

He was crouched before the stove, putting paper and kindling inside and pieces of white oak on top of them. I stood in my wet coat.

"Close the door," said Wade. "There's a draft."

He opened the damper and lit the fire. The kindling popped and then the oak caught: it sounded like someone breaking twigs in the stove, or those party favors you pull to make a noise. Wade had his pale eyes set on the stove as he sat before it and waited for it to warm up the room.

"Why didn't you say something?" said Wade.

"He would have fired you," I said.

"Yes," said Wade. "He would have at that. He would have fired me."

The stove began to warm up and Wade touched the top of it quickly with his finger, wetting it first, the way you do to see if an iron is hot.

"You got a raise," I said.

"Yes," said Wade, looking now not so angry at my father as at the plumber who sold him down the river in Wyoming for the reward money. He seemed to be thinking of coils of copper wire.

So, when I first felt the bullets ripping into the P-40, I could see Wade's face in the springtime after my father had driven the Buick

through the turns above the Delaware. I noticed that night, standing with Wade under the light in front of the garage where the Buick was, that Wade's hair had some gray in it. He had a sharp, curved nose, pouches under his eyes and in his cheeks: the pouches were trembling. I was thinking about his face and its resemblance to Stan Laurel's when an oil line in the P-40 was shot through: the smoke was as black as a bat.

"You know," said Wade, "he really shouldn't do that."

"No," I said.

"We're all going to go in the soup for his shit," said Wade.

"Yes," I said.

"It makes me mad," said Wade. "I don't have to tell you it scares me."

"Look," I said, "teach me to drive."

"You?" said Wade.

"Me," I said, "then we'll fix my father."

"And Chip," said Wade, "how are you going to let your father know you can drive?"

"I'll think of a way," I said.

"Yes, certainly, you're his son," said Wade, "but listen, Chip, do you suppose I have to be in the car when the . . . demonstration is made?"

"Probably," I said. "Yes."

"I'd rather be someplace else," said Wade.

I turned back to the house.

"All right," said Wade, "but you better learn and learn well. One false move and we're done. Is that clear?"

"Yes," I said. "Thanks."

On the early spring evening when I decided to learn to drive and had made arrangements for lessons, I walked from the garage to the house and across the porch. My father was sitting in the living room, in front of the fire.

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"What's wrong with you?" he said.

"Nothing," I said.

"Then go to bed," he said.

Wade and I began a half month later, on my Easter break. I was sixteen. Wade drove my father and me up for the first weekend and then my father took the train back. The Buick had been fixed and it was as black and silky as before. When I went into the cool garage I could sense that industrial presence, as though the steel mills and smokestacks and buildings with hundreds of small windows, the foundries and manufacturers of drill presses all had a beautiful dream and this machine, the sleek Buick, was it. I climbed the stairs to Wade's apartment after he had driven my father to the station.

"Come on," I said.

"Let's wait," said Wade.

"You put him on the train, didn't you?" I said.

"Yes," said Wade.

"Well, let's go," I said.

"Maybe he stopped and got a taxi," said Wade, "maybe he forgot something. Let's wait."

So we sat in his apartment, looking out the windows of the garage. Wade smoked cigarettes and flicked the ashes in his hand and then emptied them into the stove.

"You know why I got locked up?" said Wade.

"For stealing telephone wire," I said. "You told me yourself."

"Yeah," said Wade. "But I didn't tell you why I stole the wire."

Wade had a sister, who was tall and good-looking (he said), although her hair was turning gray by the time she was twenty-five. She had eyes of a strange color. ("Almost purple, Chip," said Wade, "and they were beautiful to see.") Her name was Sherry and she wasn't very smart. When Wade was in Cheyenne, his sister got pregnant, and the father was out of town within a half hour of

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being told of Sherry's condition. Sherry had the child, and when she went into labor she had a midwife come to the shack she shared with Wade. The child was born dead and it was a monster, having two heads. The midwife took it away. There was a carnival in town, and a few days later, when Sherry was up, although feeling stricken and like a fool ("which she was," said Wade), she borrowed the price of admission from Wade and went to the carnival. She saw her baby in a display of monstrosities. The baby was in a jar filled with formaldehyde. Sherry told Wade about it and Wade went to see the manager of the carnival, who wouldn't part with the baby, which he had bought from the midwife. Or he wouldn't part with the baby for less than five hundred dollars. "It really packs them in," the manager said to Wade. "He was probably damn right," said Wade. "It was strange to look at." Wade looked for the midwife, but couldn't find her, and then stole the wire and got sent up for it. Wade only did a year and a half and when he got out he took his sister and they went to Oregon, where the carnival was, and one night they broke into the wagon which held the baby and they stole it. They buried the baby in the Cascades among some spruce trees.

"He's not coming back," said Wade, flicking his cigarette into the cup of his hand. "Let's teach you to drive."

"Sure," I said.

We went down into the darkened, damp garage.

"Wade?" I said.

"Yes, Chip?" said Wade.

"Did you bury the baby in the bottle?" I said.

"No," said Wade. "We put it in a pillow case. Sherry cried to beat the band."

There were patches of snow in the woods and a little ice on the road. Wade drove and I sat in the front seat on the passenger side until we came to a back road that wasn't used by anyone, except poachers and people who were lost. When Wade stopped the car he

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looked in the rearview mirror, over his shoulder, and on each side of the Buick, as though he expected my father to come crashing out of the still-dormant woods and say, "Wade, I want you to explain, in your own words, what the hell you're doing."

"All right," said Wade, "get behind the wheel."

He climbed out and I slid over. We moved up the seat so I could reach the pedals, although I was growing fast and really didn't need the seat moved up that much. Wade was six feet, anyway. I sat with my hands on the wheel.

"Do you know how an internal combustion engine works?" said Wade.

"Jesus Christ," I said.

"All right," said Wade. "I just wanted to make sure."

He showed me how to work the clutch and change the gears, to put on the brake: it didn't take much explaining since almost any American boy understands machinery the way an American Indian child understands animals: more in the eyes and fingertips than in the brain. I took it easy, at least in the beginning, driving along, trying to change the gears so smoothly you couldn't tell it was being done.

"That's good," said Wade, "that's all right."

We continued, after the thaw, whenever we got a chance.

One afternoon, a Sunday in the middle of genuine spring (when the oak was flowering with reddish clusters and the maples were blooming, too, but their flowers had seedpods that looked like green wing nuts), Wade and I were on a deserted stretch of macadam. It was a crowned road that ran straight for a while before making a hard turn to the left. I felt the list of the Buick because the crown was high.

"How do you control a skid?" I said.

"You're going too fast!" said Wade.

I gave the Buick a little more gas.

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"You're going too fast!" said Wade.

"I thought you were going to teach me," I said. "Well?"

We continued along the straight part of the road gaining speed: the Buick had a sloppy quality in the way it was being driven, something of the aspect of a woman who is walking quickly and showing that she needs a girdle.

"All right," said Wade. "Stop the car."

I stopped the car and slid over as Wade got out and walked in front of the Buick and I saw his elongated reflection in the lacquered hood.

"I'm going to show you this and then you'll practice it by yourself," said Wade. "Is that clear? I don't want to be in the car."

He put the seat back.

"What's wrong, Wade?" I said.

"Nothing," he said.

He looked at me once with his pale, reddish eyes, and then turned the Buick around and drove back up the straight part of the macadam. He drove precisely and steadily, almost unnoticeably: it seemed Wade had never been in an accident and never driven (or would have been shocked to find out that people did drive) faster than forty miles an hour. He stopped and turned the car around. We faced the straightaway, the long piece of paved country road. The understory and the bittersweet and blueberries were beginning to grow, but it was still too early for the mountain laurel to bloom.

"I had it tuned," said Wade.

He said this like, I got a lawyer and put him on retainer because I knew you'd end up like this.

"Good," I said.

"Yes," said Wade as he put the accelerator to the floor.

The trees on both sides of the crowned piece of macadam rose and jumped toward the rear of the Buick as Wade went through the gears. The tops of the trees, not filled with leaves yet and having

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that splattered ink shape against the sky, touched the shiny hood of the Buick, were smeared there, and then slid away. I smiled, because the speed of the car gave me that buzzing sense of wonder, the odd sense of being stunned, that I felt the first time a woman smiled at me over a glass of champagne (I remember the glass had a hollow stem and the bubbles seemed to rise to her lips). The Buick went straight down the piece of macadam and there seemed to be something consciously steady in its path, or something more intricate than just having a driver who kept the car moving in a straight line: there was the illusion of a certain safety, or peace, or sanctuary in the road, and that the man who was driving had found it, and that he would not lose it, although it could be lost if the car were moving along a path that was just a tenth of an inch away from the one it was on. The turn went to the left. Directly in front of us were woods, the gray pillars. When Wade approached the turn he didn't brake. He double-clutched and shifted down and I could feel a gyroscopic tug, the turning of the driveshaft, engine, and transmission, which tug or pull kept the car moving in that same sense of sanctuary as the Buick went through the turn in something that approached a straight line, one that ran from the right side of the road to the highest point of the turn and then back to the right side again, where we faced another straight and crowned piece of macadam. Once, in the middle of the turn the Buick had begun to drift: the rear end broke from the line on which Wade was driving and he touched the wheel a little, just turned slightly into the skid and the car came back into that sanctified line. When we faced the next stretch of macadam we were in second gear and Wade shifted into third as the engine whined itself into that Frankenstein pitch, the point where you begin to believe machines live. Wade kept his foot on the floor. We must have been going close to eighty when we were a hundred yards out of the turn.

"That'll come in handy," I said.

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"Yes," said Wade.

He slowed down and pulled over. He looked as though he expected all the trees to turn into dragons, that every crack in the road would become a lizard. He lit a cigarette and slid over to the passenger side. I got behind the wheel, turned the car around, and started back toward the farm. Wade smoked Camels and I remember seeing the desert and pyramids on the package.

"Yes," said Wade after a minute, "I suppose that will come in handy."

He shrugged and looked down at his feet. I was too young then to understand regret but when, in the P-40, in the stench of burning oil and in the sound of the wings opening into metal flowers, I saw Wade's shoulders and the expression on his face as he stared at his feet in the Buick, I was glad, as the horizon began its lazy turn and as I could distinguish the cactus below, that I hadn't said anything to Wade.

At the time we sat quietly in the car and then Wade said, "What do you say, Chip, to a matinee?" and we drove down to the railroad town where the movie theater was and sat on the seats which were as shaggy as an unshorn ram. We watched the flickering images, the screen's frosted grain. It was a jungle movie and Wade was bored by the animals.

Now when we practiced, Wade drove to a place where there was a straightaway and a turn and got out of the car to sit on a stump in the woods, as far back as he could get while still being able to watch me and the Buick as I drove down the straight part of the road and went through the turn. Sometimes I could feel that sense of sanctuary, that sureness, and other times it eluded me. On these occasions Wade said, "You're oversteering," or "You're shifting down too soon," or "You've got to be more delicate at the wheel. Never, never, jerk it," after which comment or comments he'd go back to his stump and beckon and I'd go through the turn again. As

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the summer became hotter we looked for other places, sections of road that were both deserted and filled with tight turns. I practiced there, too, while Wade sat in the woods, far enough from the road so that if I had been a poor student and left the road in the Buick at a high rate of speed, Wade would be able to attend to the smoking wreck.

"I'll just get out of harm's way," said Wade with a shrug and a glance at his wing tip shoes, before tramping into the undergrowth.

"You have a talent for it," said Wade.

He said this, I guess, because he thought it was a small miracle (or a large one for that matter) that we had managed to get through most of the summer (practicing sometimes five days a week) without putting anything more than a small scratch on the Buick, and this was done by Wade, when he was turning around on one of those country roads. And I suppose I did have a talent for it. It was one of the things that got me into the air over the desert with a Messerschmitt behind me.

In September, when the sky turned that gas-flame blue, Wade said to me, "Chip, I can't teach you anything more. That's all."

I nodded.

"Okay," I said.

"You'll be going back to school, soon," said Wade, "won't you, Chip?"

"Yes," I said.

"I was wondering, Chip," said Wade, "if you could tell me what *de jure* means?"

"According to law," I said.

We were driving back to the farm, along the Delaware, past the place where there was an eel trap: the water was low and you could see the V shape of the trap just beneath the surface. The V had the same shape as a flight of geese. We drove for a while without saying anything.

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"There aren't going to be any more driving lessons," said Wade.

"I know," I said.

"Shit," said Wade. He glanced at the Delaware. Its surface looked pressure-flaked by the wind.

We came up to the farm and Wade parked the car in the garage. He got out of the Buick on his side and climbed the stairs to his apartment and left me in the cool darkness of the garage, in the odor of the Buick. When I decided to jump from the P-40 and had begun to work the canopy back and when the horizon had already turned up to ninety degrees and I was working my way through the smoke (it was like standing just behind the smokestack of a train), I was also glad I hadn't thanked Wade.

I went back to school, and life became more regular again, classes and studies, the smell of chalk, ink, and new clothes. Weekends were spent at the apartment with the imitation Mexican garden or at the farm. I missed the Buick lessons, and those evenings in late June and early July when I went to the Mongaup River and fished for trout, watched the delicate and small dragons that were mayflies.

In early November, on a Friday evening, my father said, "Come on, you pissant, we're going up to the farm."

I took a small bag and we went downstairs, where Wade had the Buick waiting. We got into the backseat, and my father said, "Wade, now we'll begin the process of drinking and driving, slowly along." Wade seemed a little hunched up, uncomfortable, pushed against the wheel. As soon as we got through the tunnel and across the New Jersey marshlands, my father said, "Wade, I'm thirsty. You better stop at the first place you come to." We drove through the deadfish smell of New Jersey and came to a bar. Actually, it was just someone's living room with a beer sign in the window but that suited my father. Especially when he was a little on the jumpy side. Wade and I, of course, stayed in the parking lot.

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"How's school?" said Wade.

"Fine," I said.

"That's good," said Wade, "education's the thing."

He still seemed to be hunched a little at the wheel. I waited for a while, but Wade didn't ask about Madame Curie, or Cromwell, or the Reign of Terror, or the Wars of the Roses. We just sat in the parking lot.

"Argentina," I said.

"You're too old," said Wade.

"What?" I said.

"You're too old for that stuff now," said Wade, as he sat behind the wheel, hunched and cramped and oddly braced.

"What about the questions?" I said.

"Too old," said Wade.

"Oh," I said.

We sat in the parking lot and watched the beer sign in the living room window. It was fall and there weren't any insects to look at and you could still smell New Jersey.

"I'd be embarrassed," said Wade.

"Come on, Wade," I said.

"Too old," said Wade.

"What about the movies?" I said. "I can't be too old for them, can I?"

Wade sat for a long time before he turned and looked at me and said, "No. You're not too old for them. I guess you can still come along. But, Chip, you'll have to ride in the back." And we kept going to the movies, too, both of us sitting in the dark and waiting for that woman to appear on the torn screen, although we didn't see her very often.

My father came out of the bar with that look of angry satisfaction he usually had after a couple of snorts. Wade still sat in that cramped position.

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"Wade," said my father, "scratch that place off the list. They're doing something to the hooch. Something I wouldn't recommend."

Wade humped up a little more and started the engine.

"Guess I'll have a cigar," said my father with a smiling glance at me, "maybe that will improve the quality of the rotgut."

My father smoked one cigar and then another. We stopped at a couple more roadhouses and Wade and I sat in the car without saying a word. The last roadhouse had as a marquee or awning a large plaster of Paris steer, beneath which you had to walk to get in or out of the restaurant. I looked out the window of the Buick and saw my father admiring with his shoe (a kick at a hoof, a little kick at the hock) one of the hind legs of the steer. I suppose he was almost satisfied with the amount of bourbon he had been able to drink in one place.

We drove for a while and my father smoked and went on about how he'd like to run a few head of cattle because then he could collect the manure in a garbage can and bring it to that last restaurant and climb up on the plaster of Paris steer so that when someone whose looks my father didn't like came out of the roadhouse my father would be able to dump a pile of manure on him. My father laughed about this. A little later I began to squirm. Just like clockwork.

"Wade," said my father, "stop the car. This so-called son of mine is going to puke."

Wade stopped the Buick and my father opened the door. I kneeled in a culvert and heaved my guts out. It was cold and I could see the light mist in the air from my breathing.

"You done?" said my father.

"Just about," I said.

"Well, hurry up," he said, "I didn't drive sixty miles to spend the night watching a pissant heave his guts in a ditch."

It was fall now and I kneeled in leaves, could hear their cold

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rustling when I moved. It seemed to me I'd made a stop in this particular ditch before. My father flicked some ashes out of the open door of the Buick.

"Don't tell me you can't even puke right," he said.

He really had had a couple.

"I'm done," I said, "I'm through."

My father didn't notice the change in tone, but Wade did. I could see his pale, hound's eyes in the rearview mirror. They followed me as I came in through the door and slid back on the seat. I wiped my face with my handkerchief and sat in the cigar-scented air.

"Well, Wade," said my father, "the boy's done. Can't you see that. Get a move on."

"Yes, sir," said Wade, still sitting straight up, braced in his seat.

The night was cool, although not cold enough to freeze water yet. The cool days usually made my head feel clear, and I'd like to walk in the woods and hear the geese honk at night. I tasted the sour, acidic vomit, and sat in the Buick. Whenever a car passed in the opposite direction (and it had to be the opposite direction: if someone passed *us*, Wade would have been taken up on a warrant), Wade looked into the backseat, into my eyes, and he seemed to be asking, Well? Well? What did we spend the whole summer doing? What was that for? What are you going to do with it? But at the same time he seemed to be thinking (alternately with the questions), I hope the boy doesn't do anything. I couldn't stand it. I shouldn't have taught him anything. I get sick just thinking about the boy doing something.

Whenever my father decided it was time to take the wheel he made a gesture with his arm: it looked as though he were saying, After you, you first. His right arm was held graciously away from his body. He usually sat on the left side of the car, so he came close to slapping me with the back of his hand when he was about to take

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the wheel. We came to my father's favorite stretch of road, that part where it was straight up on one side, straight down on the other and filled with turns. When we approached the "chute," my father began to make that gesture, After you, after you.

"Stop the car, Wade," I said, consciously lowering my voice a shade deeper than it normally is (and a shade deeper than my father's normally is, too): this was easy because my voice was changing and I could make it go as high or low as I liked.

"Stop the car, Wade. I'll take it from here."

Wade stopped the car. My father sat there with his arm still extended in such a manner that could be blessing, salute, or just half-cocked. He gave me one of those glances that are supposed to say, I hereby order that you be taken to the State Correctional Facility at Ossining and there to be electrocuted until you are dead: It's time you took a hot squat, you little pissant. I didn't hesitate. I got out and walked in front of the Buick, passed the headlights and Wade, too, as he walked in the other direction, and all I can say about him is that he didn't look overjoyed, although there was something in his Stan Laurel terror which seemed to imply complete ignorance of anything that had taken place in the preceding months.

"I don't know anything about this, Mr. Mackinnon," said Wade, and you could tell the lie was sweet, although he was saying it because he was getting ready to die. He wasn't sure he'd get a chance to deny it on the other side of the turns, and I don't think it would have given him much pleasure to say it while we were nosing into the Delaware. And I understood, too, why Wade had been sitting in that cramped, braced position: he'd already moved the seat forward.

"Chip, you little bastard," said my father, "how are you going to get through there? You've been puking half the way up here. And, anyway, you can't even drive."

I flipped on the high beams.

"That's right," said my father, "those are the lights. Now get the hell . . ."

I put the Buick into first gear, released the hand brake, put the accelerator to the floor, and let out the clutch. I could see in Wade's face an expression compounded of dread, fear, and delight. He was watching my father as the Buick's tires burned, as I kept the accelerator on the floor and went through the gears. We went up the straightaway, approached the first turn, and we were going fast: Wade had had the Buick tuned and the carburetor adjusted. I'd be willing to bet he'd found out the exact altitude of (and the percentage of water in the air on) these particular turns and had the carburetor adjusted accordingly. The Buick was running well. The weather was perfect, too. It had rained a day or so before, but nothing had frozen, so the road was without a grain of sand on it and I could feel the rough macadam, the clean and comfortingly abrasive surface. I was in third as we approached the first turn. There was a little mist coming off the Delaware, which was five hundred feet or more below. The bluestone looked like a curtain, a straight drop, on the right side of the road. I had an instant to look in the mirror and I saw that Wade's sweet revenge had become that terror which just makes you want to turn your head: he looked more like Stan Laurel than even I had thought possible. My father was holding onto the strap that hung from the side of the car and he was alternately giving Wade suspicious looks and me the Sing Sing glare. This last softened a little when we approached the first turn.

"Chip, Chip," said my father, "now just wait, Chip . . . just wait a minute."

I shifted down, double-clutching and punching the engine on the way, and felt the Buick rise into the gyroscopic sense of sanctuary, the straight line that went from the bottom of one turn to the top of another. Wade nodded in the rearview mirror, although he seemed a little grim about it. I shifted up again and headed into

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another turn, one of those where the lights swung over the empty space above the Delaware.

"Some people think all you have to do is straighten out the bends, Wade," I said, "but that's just not true, because you've got to use the gearbox, Wade, you've got to keep the rpms up."

We still stayed in the sanctified line, although there were times when I could feel it slipping away and then I looked into the mirror and Wade nodded or shook his head (still a little grimly, it seemed to me) meaning, Don't jerk the wheel, slow down. I was scared when I could feel it slipping away, because I thought I might not be able to get it back and this would give my father a chance to air his political beliefs in the midst of breaking wood, a racing engine, and Wade's last long shriek of terror. There weren't any other cars on the road. I didn't brake once. I saw in the mirror my father, who was hanging onto the strap and filling his cheeks with air until they looked like big tomatoes. I kept the accelerator on the floor, shifting up and down, swinging toward the guardrails and then back to the sheer walls. We skidded once and I touched the steering wheel as gently as a loving, private caress and the Buick came back into line. Wade nodded and smiled through the dread. Then the old man gave Wade a mean look, but Wade just kept staring ahead, watching the oncoming, lighted, and moving landscape and air. We must have been doing eighty when we came to the other side.

"Chip, my boy," said my father, "Chip, Chip . . ."

I shifted down and put my foot against the brake pedal. On the right side of the road, on the side away from the Delaware, there was a flat, sandy place where people parked their cars sometimes. It was now empty. Beyond it there was more bluestone wall, rising straight from the sandy parking spot. I hit the brakes and turned the wheel. My father and Wade were pressed into the springs of the nap-covered seat as the rear end of the Buick swung around. They stared, without saying a word, at the landscape which had stopped

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being split into two moving planes by the car and was now one collection of moving streaks, all of which went in the same direction.

Wade had not told me about sand. As the Buick spun I sat behind the wheel and felt that the grip of the tires was gone. The car was light, its motion now slick rather than rolling. Later, in El Paso, where I learned to fly, I felt again that terror. I was on a runway in a machine made of aluminum and steel which was about to become ethereal and buffeted, bumped by wind. The Buick went directly across the sand and hit the wall. We first struck the bluestone on the passenger side and I saw the right, front window crack and heard the thump as both fenders buckled. A headlamp broke and bits of it came across the hood: it looked like someone had broken a champagne glass over the grill and the Buick ornament. The dust swept over the car, but the engine was still running, so I put it in gear, pulled away from the wall, and stopped.

"Sand," I said. "Sand. Lousy sand."

My father still held onto the strap that was attached to the inside of a window post. Wade couldn't get out of the Buick. The door on his side was crushed shut, so he was trapped.

"Why didn't you teach him about sand, too?" said my father as he turned his face on Wade.

"I thought he was going to stay on the damn road," said Wade. "At least I hoped he would."

"So it was you," said my father, "wasn't it?"

We sat in the Buick and listened to the engine run. My father lit a cigar.

"Let's get out and look," he said.

We got out. Most of the side was crushed, and the fenders were pushed against the tires. Wade and I were able to pull them back with our hands and a stick my father found at the side of the road. He smoked his cigar and watched. Then the tires were free and we all sat down, each looking in a different direction. We didn't want

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to look at one another for a while. I smelled the smoke of cigar, but that's not why I didn't feel well. After a while my father said, "What's wrong with 'bends?' "

"What's wrong with 'turns?' " I said, sitting on the bumper of the Buick.

"I thought 'bends' had a little more tone to it," said my father.

Wade was sitting at the other end of the Buick, holding his hands, shaking his head and swearing a little: every now and then I heard my name in the angry mumble. After a while, though, we heard his feet moving in the sandy soil.

"He drove the turns all right, though," said Wade.

"Yes," said my father, "I guess that's true. Chip, you drive the rest of the way. Wade, you get in back with me."

I drove up the hill to the farm, passed the trees, the bright leaves, the maples being the brightest, a color that looked like the orange a horseshoe is before a blacksmith begins to hammer it. We listened as a tire rubbed against a smashed fender. I stopped the car at the house and Wade got out and took the wheel.

"It didn't work out the way we saw it, did it, Chip?" he said.

"No," I said and walked to the porch.

The light was on and my father and I saw one another clearly. My father's color was still a little high, but he was beginning to settle down to his natural, bourbon red. We stood opposite one another. Every now and then my father made that I'm-going-to-take-the-wheel gesture with his hand and looked at me and grunted. He'd drop it, or scratch his ear, or search his coat for something in an aimless, patting fashion, but he'd go on staring at me: his eyes had a peculiar quality, as though he were looking at me through a knothole. He lifted his arm again, and sighed, and knocked me across the porch. He hit me with the back of his hand, but he had made it into a fist, so the knuckles came down on the

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cheekbone. I could tell, even as I was flying through the air and in the crash as I made a heap against the house, that my face was going to look sick for a while. My eyes smarted, but I wasn't crying yet. He hadn't said anything, and there hadn't been any sound aside from the muffled slap (like the sound of windfall fruit) and the thump I made as I hit the house. I picked myself up and tried to laugh. He hit me again. It wasn't like the first time. There is a difference between the way a man hits another man and the way a man will strike a child: my father made the difference quite clear when he knocked me down the second time.

"I'll bet you think you're pretty smart," he said.

"Not now," I said.

"I don't want you scaring me," he said. "I don't want any surprises."

He picked me up and gave me a good shaking.

"No more," he said. "Do you hear me? No more."

One of my eyes was closing. I felt this pain once again, later, when I hit the sand in the desert after standing in the smoky wind, after letting go of the hot grip and falling. I saw the creased umbrella, the white silk overhead. The Messerschmitt passed by. As I rolled on the hot sandy dirt, as my face scraped across it, I thought of my father, the porch, the Buick.

"You hear me?" he said.

"Yes," I said, but I only meant I heard him: that's all I agreed to.

"Good," he said.

He opened the door for me and we went into the living room. There was a fire in the fireplace and I sat on the fender.

"You going to puke again?" said my father.

"No," I said.

"Well," he said, "don't do it in the fire."

My father made two mint juleps and handed one to me. He

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made them with crushed ice and a lot of mint. We sat opposite one another and drank our juleps. Mine was good. I touched my cheek, which felt strangely stuffed.

"Anything broken?" said my father.

"No," I said.

He looked disappointed and sounded so in his grunted acknowledgment.

"Nothing that I can feel anyway," I said.

"It's not important," he said, with a shrug, as though excusing me from some obligation. "Drink up."

My mother came into the room in her long black dress and her black shoes. She had been upstairs in her study and I'm sure she had seen the side of the Buick when we had pulled up to the house. Her expression was one of curiosity and of longing.

"I want to know what happened," she said.

My father sat in his leather armchair and looked at his drink.

"I decided to drive those turns above the Delaware and I hit a wall. Wasn't bad. No one hurt, except Chip. He's got a little mark on his cheek. I want you to know that it was something I did and that I was in charge. That's all."

My mother stared at us for a while, still with that questioning expression on her face.

"Chip," she said, "is that what happened? I want you to explain."

"No one expected the sand," I said.

"Sand?" said my mother.

"That's where the car hit the wall," I said.

"There was no need for a sense of tragedy," said my father, still staring at me. His color was more normal now.

"All right," said my mother. "Are you two ready to eat?"

"No," said my father. "I don't think we are. You want another drink, Chip?"

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"Yes," I said.

"Don't get him drunk," said my mother, as she stood at the door with that puzzled look on her face. Then she went into the dining room to wait.

"It doesn't matter," said my father, giving me another drink. "You're old enough now, you little pissant, to drink as much as you want. Aren't you?"

My eye was swollen shut when we sat down to dinner. We ate a meal of roast pork with apple cider and cream gravy, mashed potatoes, brussels sprouts, and we shared a bottle of white wine. I ate carrot cake. My father drank brandy. While we ate my mother watched us with her smooth face and her hair in a tight bun. She wasn't very old then, probably thirty-six. Her eyes were dark, and her fingers were long, and she had that puzzled expression, which sometimes became one of anger, as though someone were keeping some special knowledge from her.

"I guess you'll be all right, Chip," she said.

"Sure he will," said my father, "we're not going to have any more trouble, are we?"

I started to laugh and the old man fired up.

"No," I said, "no." But all I meant was, No, don't hit me again. Not tonight. You'll have plenty of other chances.

When I was in prison camp there were seven of us in our sleeping porch or shack. We were woken up each morning by Ansell Augustus, a pilot from Texas who was crazy to be a disc jockey when he got home. He'd wake up at five o'clock in the morning and start brushing his hair. The shack wasn't large. That endlessly repeated sound was maddening. The Red Cross had told Ansell Augustus that he'd soon be receiving the first installment of a correspondence course for disc jockeys, and he could hardly wait for it to arrive. ("Then we'll have some fun," said Ansell Augustus, "when I'm announcing to you boys.") Sometimes when he woke up

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I'd take down a letter I'd received from Wade. It was written in a sloppy, large scrawl which reminded me of a child's drawing of a rabbit. "I hope you are all right," it said, "but I thought you'd like to know that your father doesn't drive those turns above the Delaware the way he used to. He says he's given it up for the duration, which I hope for your sake isn't long. Regards. Wade. P. S. I miss you at the movies. That girl we looked for was my wife. I married her when I was twenty-five and she was fifteen and she left on a Greyhound a year later. A carnival barker paid her way. I loved her, so that's why I wanted her to go."

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Mrs. Mackinnon's Book of Animals, Reptiles, Plants, Trees, Birds, Bugs, and Flowers

Mayflies are beautiful, delicate, and benign: they live not much more than a day and I think that it is this shortness of life mixed with beauty that fascinates me. I am not a pretty woman. My favorite mayfly is one that appears in late June and early July. Usually, it is found near water, streams especially. My favorite, *Potomanthus diaphanus*, is white from its tail to its eyes. I am an arbitrary woman, so such questions as which appeared first, egg or adult, don't bother me. Mayflies begin as aquatic creatures, and they live on the bottom of streams, beneath stones there, or in silt. At this stage they are called nymphs and they look like a bug or insect. *Potomanthus diaphanus*, or cream variant (as my husband calls it: he likes to fish for trout), in its nymphal stage is brown or dark brown. It has six legs, three on each side, a kind of carapace over its thorax, a segmented tail (that looks something like a lobster's), and at the end of a tail, three small, featherlike appendages. I don't think the nymphs are attractive, because they are graceless, and they move with the earthbound insect's (barely audible, but nevertheless distinctly) squeaking joints. They do not seem to have pride, either. In late June and early July, in the evenings or late afternoons, the nymphs begin to move, to squirm and climb out of the silt or from under the stones at the bottom of the stream: they either swim to the surface or to a rock at the surface of the water, and there they break their cases, the earthbound insect's skin. The case splits up and down, just like a zippered suit, not crossways, like

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medieval armor. The creature which emerges from the armor is the fly, the cream variant. Many of the mayflies are taken by trout at this point. When it leaves the case its wings are folded, but the fly has pouches under its wings that are filled with fluid, and this fluid is pumped by the fly into the wings: they become extended, and, in a few moments, dry. You can see the veins in the wings through which this fluid runs: the wings are glassine and the veins look like those sharp spines you see sometimes in a piece of ice, those dandelion-like puffs in a cube. When its wings are dry it flies from the stream to the nearest tree. This is the first few hours of the cream variant's life. It is beautiful now. It has four wings, two large ones and two small ones, the small ones being located at the bottom of the larger wings. Its body is gently segmented, pure white. It has a tail, comprised of three long threads that extend from the end of the last segment of its body. It has four almost unnoticeable feet. You can see the cream variant easily when it flies: it's as white as linen and it flies smoothly and slowly over the stream and against the early summer foliage. Its tail is delicate, so capable of being injured easily. If there is any breeze over the stream, the cream variants ride it, and you can see them floating on the moving air. At this time the flies are ready to mate, and they do so in the air, the male taking the female from below as they hover over the stream (or if they are lucky, riding the breeze). They separate and the female returns to the stream where she dips her eggs into the water. When the metamorphosis from nymph to fly takes place, the jaws are lost, so even if the female escapes the trout she will end up the remainder of her time, like the male, starving. Even if there were something for them to eat, the flies would not be able to do so. I find this a pity, but I also find that it makes me more appreciative of them, that it enhances their delicacy. The eggs, of course, hatch and become nymphs, which feed on aquatic life (small, almost microscopic freshwater shrimp, for instance) and take their places under

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stones or in silt, waiting for that time, when the temperature of water or air is right (usually in June and July) for them to begin to make their way to the surface. There are hundreds of species of mayflies, and they hatch at different times of the spring and summer, but none, I think, is as lovely as *Potomanthus diaphanus*, although almost all are as delicate, and I love to be near a stream in the summer when there is a breeze so I can watch the flies (with their hair-fine tails and blur of wings), some bright, others gray, floating above the lazy, sluggish water.

There are times, however, when the mayflies move away from the stream, and, in the evening, after mating, they mistake a macadam road for water, and they try to lay their eggs there. Many times I have picked a cream variant, or other mayflies, off our Buick. Occasionally I will have a lovely dream, in which I rise from the brook and find myself with a body that is as white as porcelain, and wings that are as clear as cellophane: I can see the stream (which is the same color as the sky) and on both sides of me there are green walls, broken here and there by small creeks that run into the main stream. There are flowers, too, the pinkish and white petals of mountain laurel, or the white petals of rhododendron. I just float on the breeze, which is as pleasant as sweet breath, and watch the water and the foliage as I drift by. There is no sound aside from the smooth hiss of joints as I work my wings. It makes me feel wonderful when I wake up, but, even though in the dream I do not end up smashed on the Buick's windscreen, in real life I end up riding in the backseat.

Mrs. Mackinnon's Book of Animals, Reptiles, Plants, Trees, Birds, Bugs, and Flowers

I HAVE SEEN THE BEARS IN OUR WOODS, BUT IT IS DIFFICULT TO do so, and it requires both patience and luck. We have black bears, not the largest, but a species which nevertheless has in common with other bears many characteristics, including even those of the grizzly. The average weight for an adult, three-year-old black bear is three hundred pounds, although one was shot a few years ago not far from this land, and that bear was over five hundred pounds. They have five curved claws on each foot, poor eyesight, good hearing, and a fine sense of smell. Their fur is black and quite warm. Black bears do not hibernate so much as lapse into a heavy sleep when the weather becomes cold, a sleep from which they can be easily aroused. I have seen a bear's den, or discovered its whereabouts in January, when the snow was on the ground, by the white spouts of breath that came from a hole beneath a windfall oak. Mostly, though, in spring, summer, and fall, the bears are difficult to locate: they are solitary (unless a she bear with cubs), nocturnal, and they cover vast amounts of territory. They also seem to be aloof, but I think this is an illusion. The best time, I've found, to see a bear is in the early summer when the blueberries are ripe. If you know where there's a good patch, you can usually see a bear there in the forenoon, slowly moving along, eating the berries with a good appetite. I have seen a female at this time with two cubs, ushering them along: the bushes of the berries were about two feet high, so mostly I saw the female and she looked like a seal in a green

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ocean with two younger ones breaching every now and then in brown arcs. The bears mate in June and the cubs are born in January or February, small creatures who are looked after in the den until the mother feels they are grown enough to forage with her, and, of course, they are playful and wonderful to see, each knocking the other down, one chasing another until the mother is angry enough to separate them. The males, as is well known, fight with one another for territory, and they mark their trails, or the trees along them, by scratching the bark. They like birch for this, or any other wood which has thin bark and which carries scars for a long time. The marks on a bear's trail are easy to see, each having four or five scratches made by the bear's claw: these serve to warn other bears of a male's presence. I have seen a bear's hieroglyphic, year after year, and have been able to identify him by it.

It is the bear's solitariness, his inability to be social, the prison-like quality of his life that interests me. A bear has no muscles in his face, nothing in cheeks or forehead to show anger, fear, or the desire to be friendly. He is confined behind that brownish skin and fur, in that lipped and thick expression he carries. The males are only with the females for a few weeks in June, and the females are usually with their cubs, but only spend a year with each set. I have seen the males alone, walking their trails in the woods, trying to catch the scent of other creatures, if only to avoid them. Bears are good swimmers, too, and I have seen a solitary bear floating in a broad and deep glide in the river, on his back there with his mouth open and feeding on a large hatch of mayflies. The trout jumped and rose around him, but the bear seemed oblivious to them, being intent on the light, fragile texture of the wings of the mayfly. There was no way, though, for the bear to show his pleasure at the cool water of the Delaware and the taste of the mayflies. So the bear's desire can only be seen in action, when one male fights another, when a male and female strike one another (quite playfully) before

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they mate, or when (in late spring) a bear becomes hungry for pork and steals a young pig from my husband's barn. The rest of the time a bear is isolated and all the more alone for his want of expression, being left with that almost grinning, heavily lipped, and dull-eyed face, which is the appearance of the stamp placed upon bears. It is an expression I know well. Years ago a friend of my husband's came to hunt, and while in the woods waiting for a deer, a bear rose up before him, and he killed it, and was proud of it. It was not a big bear, not over two hundred pounds, but it still had the same expression on its face while stretched out on the porch that it had in life, when I had seen it eating mushrooms (large, orange chicken-of-the-woods or small brown mushrooms), or blueberries in early summer, or when it faced a rival in June. The men posed with the bear, cozying up to it, or shaking its paw, and had their picture taken. One man lay down next to it and lifted its head so that their cheeks were together: this made the bear seem more lonely, more incapable, too, of showing how much it longed for the woods at dusk when the weather is just a little cool, when the bear is full of summer fruit and is able to move and to explore. I see that incapable and to me solitary expression in many things, and can feel the frustration behind it.

Lately I have begun to dream of bears: I see them in the winter, usually one at a time, a large bear of more than five hundred pounds. It has long legs and arms and seems to be in pain, or worried, straining as it walks through the snow-covered land, its breath as white as ghosts in the air. The bear comes toward the house where I am sleeping and tries, I think, to come in, to climb the side of the house, and I can hear the scratching of its claws on the clapboards. I can see that same expression, that inability to tell or to explain: it is as though the bear is mute, but still making that cold sound in winter with its claws against the side of the house. Then I wake, in that gray-blue light of dawn, and see the woods, which are

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quickened by the bears' presence but seeming just as restrained, as aloof, and remote (and concealing as much, too) as that faintly grinning, heavy-lipped expression of the bear that was killed here years ago. At these times, I dress and have a cup of tea, waiting until it is lighter, and then I go out alone on a bear's trail, looking for tracks, watching for those trees where the bear has left its scratched, scarred message. Then I run my fingers over the jeweled scratches and feel the bears' presence and the woods as they hold the restrained ache of them. Once I woke after having this dream and I went to my husband and said, I am cold, and he said, Get back into bed. I did, and then he came into the room and spread over my bed the bearskin rug from his study. There, he said, that should keep you warm.