LEAD-OFF MAN

Late at night, sometimes, my heart starts racing. This time the last dream I remember featured a Pittsburgh Pirate outfielder at the left field wall; the ball was coming down behind him, it looked like it was gone but he leaped up -- late afternoon sun crossed his chest as he did -- he stretched his glove arm (the right) up and back, wrist extended over the wall's nearest edge, that ball disappearing in the webbing of his mitt. I was awake before I could see him come down again.

This bed is too narrow. Outside I can hear bay leaves blowing across the redwood deck, crickets. It rained off and on all day; fall in California they tell me. I'm lucky: "It'll be winter in the Midwest before you know it," they say. My friends are very hospitable. I've got a room to myself in a corner of the house where no one ever seems to go. It is very quiet -- I could be anywhere. The mattress feels damp. I could get up but the idea of walking around the house without any clothes on, or worse, in my underwear, feels awful. I forgot to bring my bathrobe and the last thing I want to do is get dressed. Roll over.

It is totally dark. I listen to the electric clock and my brain makes words and turns them into sentences and every sentence kicks my heart into higher gear, rebelling.

On my back, I cross my wrists and rest my hands upon my chest. Take a deep breath, inhale again on top of it,

exhale; repeat. Eyes closed, I'm visualizing a wide and peaceful lake. Reeds grow at the edges, water laps so quietly you barely hear it. The sky is huge and cloudless overhead. The sentences my brain spins off turn into long-necked cranes, migrating whitely across the horizon, then disappearing from view. They fly from east to west. At first they come in flocks but after awhile, if I continue watching them, there will be just one, then a space, then another.

1st

Meet Martin, George and Dan. Mid-July, last game before the All-Star break and the four of us ensconced in the twilight zone of the Chicago summer: Wrigley Field, the Cubs tied for First, on tiptoe with the New York Mets. We were going into the bottom of the Eighth inning and the score was tied 2-2. There had been hardly a sound on the field for four innings.

We were sitting on a bench in the rightfield bleachers, shoulder to shoulder with everybody else. The sun was dazzling. It had been blasting us all afternoon and people were turning red before our eyes. Most men had pulled their shirts off long ago -- some had them tied around their heads like turbans. Expectations were simmering. Martin took a hit of beer and handed me his matches; Dan, rubbing his palms together, got halfway up, "Let's go!" The organist hit his high note. Everybody yelling, yelling. Martin leaned forward, lighting another cigarette, "c'mon," then almost straightened up, "now is the time."

The only runs had come quickly in the Second. The Cubs' pitcher, Jefferson, had a mental spasm, walked a batter, hit another, struck one out, had an error made behind him, struck out another, gave up a double and got the last man looking.

The Cubs rectified things in the bottom half of the inning: Stu Rank hit a ball over our heads onto Sheffield Avenue with Willie Strummer on second.

Then the pitchers pitched and the batters made outs.

In the bottom of the Eighth, Jefferson led off with a bunt but was doubled up by the next batter. Mars Garcia hit a line drive to the third baseman. Three up, three down. It was grim when that same third baseman hit a homerun in the top of the Ninth.

Where the gamblers sat there was a lot of waving and tapping with fingers. The professionals sat against the dark green hurricane fence that was put up to keep people out of the centerfield bleachers. Astroturf was laid over those seats so that batters could get an uncluttered view of the ball when it was pitched. The gamblers were three and four abreast on several descending benches. Bets were passing up and down on pitches, balls, strikes, the chance of homerun or injury. All of these guys -- the younger ones with muscles and the older ones with tits and sunburn guards taped to their noses -- had their shirts off, a lot of pants were unbuttoned for comfort. They all were tanned like lifeguards. They drank a lot of beer. There were handfuls of money in their pockets.

When the first baseman for the Cubs, Mike Zendt, came up to bat, everyone was reaching for him as hard as they could. Someone wrote that he thought Mike had such a nice stroke he might never strike out. That was hype but who could argue with the blue glance the kid swept the field with? He looked like he'd been batting for a hundred years. Zendt edged the count to 2-2 then sliced a slider past the

rightfielder. The way Mike rounded firstbase put reason to sleep -- fifteen feet from second he launched himself into space. When the brown dirt blew away, Zendt's fingers were beneath the shortstop's wrist, rubbing the bag.

All the people standing up. Downtown Robinson at bat, his helmet riding the back of his polished skull, his eyes looking into the earth. He knocked the dirt away from his spikes and when he looked up we could see his dark cheek-bones glistening from a distance of 400 feet. He hit the first pitch he got like a meteor. It disappeared in the neighborhood beyond the leftfield wall. Cubs: 4-2. The Mets beaten swift, fierce and sure. I looked for the gamblers; all of them were gone.

We were in the street. Corner of Addison and Clark beneath the giant old blood-colored sign that proclaims the place Wrigley Field. Thousands of legs were moving around us; a line of buses was idling at the curb; somebody with a giant cassette player turned up loud and distorted walked close-by. Hungry from elation, we headed for a Japanese restaurant a couple of blocks away. We walked quickly and in pairs: Dan and George in front, Martin and I behind. Dan seemed almost giddy from the excitement, he couldn't get a smile off his face. He kept looking back at Martin and I -- joked about playing pool in a Puerto Rican bar we passed.

Martin shook out his last Marlboro and lit it as we went. He told me it was Robinson's will that impressed him. All the treatises in the world on the difficulties of hitting a pitched baseball could not begin to explain Robinson's feat, his confidence or his -- under the circumstances, not too strong a word -- grandeur. We had no right to expect this grace -- not from another human being, let alone a Cub -- but Robinson had granted it with a swing of his bat.

Inside the restaurant we sat in a booth, ordered saki and egg rolls. Dan went to wash his hands and Martin went to get a fresh pack of cigarettes. George leaned over the formica tabletop towards me, crumpling a paper placemat that was marked with mazes and word games under his elbows. He was drunk and he couldn't stop talking. He's a lawyer. He was telling me all the reasons why the Cubs could finally do it this year and everything he said made sense.

Martin came back and sat next to George, across from me. Martin is the type to usually withhold judgement, but he had just seen Downtown Robinson place a long ball, like a pearl, at the center of the Cubs' season. He was shaking his head and saying, "Did you see that? I mean, did you see it?"

Boy's, guys, men -- none of these words makes describing these three that I'm with any more sensible. To be simple I'll say that we've known each other for a long time. George, asking anybody who'll listen how many Californians

it takes to change a light bulb, I was in Boy Scouts with. Dan and Martin I have known since high school. It was Dan who suggested the college I went to -- he was there a year in advance -- and Martin joined us both there a year later. We have tried a lot of things together; been in each other's rooms in many moods. We're no fad.

Martin was saying to me, "You don't look that different, you never look that different. Maybe a little weary in the eyes, a little older in the eyes though. But you'll look the same years from now."

Our waitress wore her hair tied up high on her head. Dan daubed his beard with his napkin and watched her move. She had a long slender neck and a trashy red Dragon Lady dress. Dan said, "I keep hoping I'm in a Jade East ad."

"Is that all you want?"

We were laughing. All of us had been at Dan's wedding that Spring. He married a Polish girl. We swallowed the last of our saki and finished the egg rolls. It was time for me to get to the Northwestern Station; I was taking the train back to the suburbs.

The El is right by Wrigley Field. When we left the restaurant we retraced our stpes. Now the daylight was fading and traffic was normal, there were no cops in sight. Every place around was closed except for the Puerto Rican bar; we could hear balls striking on the pool table inside; a woman as old as she looked stood in the outer doorway wearing a pair of tight black bolero pants.

There were still a lot of people in the street by the Park. Arriving at a far corner, we were suddenly part of a large throng -- young people mostly, a lot of them Puerto Ricans -- drinking beer, rapping, playing loud music on large machines. It was a city scene and my first reaction was guarded but the people seemed benign. A kid in a tee-shirt offered a beer to Martin, who confidently took it and raised it in a foaming toast. Then, just like a movie, he drank it all down. The kid stuck up his thumb and yelled, "we're Number One!" Somebody started clapping hands to the disco music; I saw a couple start dancing -- closed eyes, shaking their heads from side to side. A squad car had pulled up but the bareheaded cops inside just sat and watched. As we headed down Addison for the El I looked over my shoulder and tried to take it all in.

I think I can remember having seen a locomotive. I mean a live locomotive -- one that was working and not merely on display. I say I <u>think</u> I can remember because I was very young at the time and so the thing might be just an enthusiastic hallucination. But I think that in fact I did see that locomotive and the reason that it seems like it might have been a hallucination is because that is the way that it looked. It was black and distant and vivid. Hot. I could see the power -- still can. It must have been real. Does it matter? Maybe the attraction of childhood to adults is that it is the only time we know when dreaming and waking

are the same. Riding a Northwestern train home for the billionth time, memories obscure the scenery and seem to have lives of their own continuing here -- in the present. Do they? I was trying to find out.

I can remember the afternoon when word came down our street that a train had derailed while pulling out of the station. It had jumped the track and taken a corner of the station roof off. The great thing was keeled over on its side like a dead whale. I knew kids who went to the scene and, after the work crews went home, scavenged up souvenirs of torn shingle, rail spikes and pitchy wood.

There were the stories of cars that stalled in the paths of trains. I saw what happened to one of those --bent into a V, windshield shattered in pieces the size of butter pats for 150 feet.

The trains were double glazed with safety glass but sometimes the outer layer would be broken. Water got in between the panes. This trapped water lolled slowly, heavily, back and forth with the motion of the train. Once I arrived in the city just after dawn following a horrendous assignation with a hoped-for lover in southern Illinois. Disconsolate and exhausted after two days of rainy frustration and an all-night trip, I climbed on the first Northwestern going home, dragged myself to the upper deck and slumped into a seat beside a cracked outer pane. I stared through my reflection at the sealed water, watching it undulate behind each stop and every start.

I wonder how it is that the details along this route are always changing but the general impression left by the trip is always the same. Chicago gradually dissolves into the suburbs or it looms ahead. The suburbs get older; shops turn into restaurants which turn into service centers of some kind, get torn down and are turned into parking lots. The suburbs themselves persist. In the other direction, so does the city. Invariably the ride takes the same amount of time: 45 minutes.

I grew up at the stop called Mt. Prospect. Mt. Prospect is northwest of Chicago on the diagonal between Des Plaines and Arlington Heights. My parents bought a house there shortly before I was born. It was a brick house with a large basement and a long attic. There were only a couple of other houses on the block at that time. There was a farm less than a hundred yards away with a cornfield, soybean patch and some grazing cattle. The rest of the area was marsh. In early evening the farmer might ride by on his horse.

The agent who sold my parents the house told them that this was the way things were going to stay. I think my parents believed him. For them, Mt. Prospect was on the rural edge; a comfortable commute with the sun setting through the corn at day's end. My parents, lifelong Chicagoans and lovers of nature with a child on the way, found this situation ideal. They settled in, imbued with hopes they had found a place where roots might sink. I was born.

Nature was available my first ten years. I was outdoors, an only child with fantasies out of Prince Valiant, trying to catch crayfish, bumping into the farmer's electrified wire, losing my clothes. I remember a lot of fun. When new houses started going up I had fun playing in their fresh-laid foundations. Marsh was subdivided into blocks and the blocks were filled in with these houses. I soon had plenty of friends. Schools were built for us, several in our town alone. The farm by our house was sold and a new high school was put in its place; the cornfield and soybean patch became football practice fields and baseball diamonds. It was all right by me. By my tenth year I had thoroughly explored the marsh -- found no venomous snakes or major predators there -- and started playing baseball. Playing ball on a regulation diamond with a backstop, baselines, a raised mound and inset homeplate felt glamorous. It seemed like a fair trade for a marsh.

My interest in baseball grew with my body. I think I must have had my first game of catch by the time I was five. As my legs got longer and my hands got larger I got more adept and my participation became more complete. My father introduced me to the game. He was a natural and enthusiastic athlete who had been an infielder of some ability. Though he spoke ruefully of how, while stationed in England during WW II, he had been his camp team's firstring shortstop (thus spending his tour there on U. S. Army sandlots rather than seeing a country his mother had always wished

her children might get to visit) still, even a child could not miss the catch of excitement in his voice when he concluded by saying what a thrill it had been to be on such a great team.

Having grown up on the North side of the city, my father, like his father before him -- and his mother, too -- was a Cub fan. I don't think I had been wearing a mitt for long when he brought me my first pack of baseball cards. I seem to see myself standing with him in the open screen door, shuffling through the cards for the first time. I asked him who was best to like and he suggested the picture of a young pitcher in a blue cap with his hands raised over his head in an imitation wind-up. The pitcher's name was Don Kaiser. I thought he looked good. My father said that I might like Don Kaiser because he was a Cub -- the Cubs, my father told me, was his favorite team. Speaking with a loose optimism I would find myself adopting later on, my father told me that the Cubs was a good team to like.

I don't think Don Kaiser ever really surfaced that year. He may have quit the game at the end of it for all I know -- it hardly mattered. I had found my team. I had climbed on the wheel.

My dad's enthusiasm became my own. Home from work, he would play catch with me before dinner. We took turns standing with our backs to the sunset. My father took his time in teaching me and never spoiled it; I learned good things about the game.

Meanwhile, there were more kids around. Houses were being thrown up on grids -- all the same design, in alternating colors with no architectural shame. Little League flourished. At school, in the Spring when practices started, the shelves above the coat hooks were lined with brightly colored baseball caps, each with the letters MP stitched boldly on the front. The town was proud of its Little League program. There was no marsh left in sight. My first team was called the Panthers. Our colors were black and silver; the uniforms were baggy grey flannel. I can remember trying that uniform on for the first time, being thrilled by the high, striped socks.

The train was slowing down and the lights of the buildings outside made their familiar blur. I got up and made my way down the narrow mettal steps from the upper deck. I slid heavy stainless steel doors open and entered the antechamber from which passengers disembark. A man, younger than me, in a brown suit with tie untied and vest unbuttoned was leaning wearily against one wall. A woman in a raincoat was holding a plastic sack with a red, white and green floral design on it. A young black conductor came in from the forward car. Paying no attention to us, he stood before the exit doors, at ease. Then he inserted his key in the air lock above the doors and waited. The train eased to a halt. The conductor twisted his wrist and the doors slid open with a hiss.

I got off the train again. Down to the asphalt platform, waiting. The train doors closed, the train pushed off for Arlington Heights. Once it passed I crossed the tracks and went for the parking lot.

It was cloudy and quiet. Beneath the tall hooked parkinglot lights my yellow car looked almost mysterious. Southeast, toward the city, the sky was smeared with a ghastly orange glow that made itself felt even this far away, affronting illusions of privacy. Before I could get out of the parking lot I saw two cop cars going in opposite directions. My friends rarely commented -- though it must have bewildered some part in each of them -- it did me -- that I was living here.

Upon hearing of the accident in which my parents were killed I locked myself in my apartment and slept for nearly two days. People became frantic trying to get hold of me. I had not unplugged my phone but the ringing could not raise me. I slept until Mr. Hiltz knocked and knocked on my door and my eyes opened. Will Hiltz was one of my parents' closest friends, also their attorney. He looked cautiously at me and told me he had been knocking for fifteen minutes. In spite of my hibernation, I felt preternaturally alert and not at all surprised to find Hiltz at my door. I was wearing my bathrobe but I felt perfectly composed, with no need for either justification or excuse. I asked him in and explained to him what had happened to me. We embraced, standing in the grey entry to my apartment.

Hiltz was understanding and steady. My parent's wishes were already being carried out -- he handed me a copy of the will, I read every word. Being an only child, single and of age, I was to receive virtually everything my parents had managed to accumulate: property, investments, savings. My parents had been conscientious, thorough and ingenious; their material legacy came to me intact. At the conclusion of the document was a request, simply expressed and unquestionable. My parents desired cremation and this was arranged for. Then they asked that their ashes be mingled in the same urn and planted deep in the backyard garden that had given them so much pleasure.

Hiltz raised his eyebrows wearily, regarded the spray of papers on my coffee table through his half-frame glasses. "Legally, I'll tell you, I don't know what the hell this means; there may be local codes involved. I would say, be unobtrusive, do this after dark or something. Certainly no one will be any the wiser -- if they should care. You can plant the urn when everyone is asleep. Being unobtrusive is the main thing -- you don't want to attract vandals, either. I don't know if that's a problem there."

I didn't know either. Hiltz began talking about the procedures for disposing of the house and what additional property there was. He wasn't aware of his pun when he told me, "I'm sorry Stan, but because of the time element now you're getting this crash course."

My parents wanted to be buried in the garden. That this should be their desire had never occured to me. We had discussed cremation in the past, I knew how they felt about that, but I had thought that they would want to be scattered over Lake Michigan or on the five acres they had bought in northern Indiana. As the years had gone by my father had grown increasingly caustic in his assessment of suburban life. When I had taken a job with a firm located in a shopping mall I know he had been surprised and, perhaps, a little disappointed.

But they had loved that garden. They had made their corner lot a tranquil showplace. Mothers would stroll by with their infants on summer evenings to admire the landscaping and the subtly startling abundance of life. Bounded by lilac bushes, it was a haven for birds. There was an Oriental calm there. My father brought my mother bouquets of herbs and transplanted wildflowers he had nurtured.

"I don't think I'll sell the house," I said.

"No?"

"I'm afraid of what might happen to it."

"You work in the surburbs, don't you?"

I found that I had not been living in the house long before I had to take out as many of the old things as I could. In the living room I pulled up the old carpet, revealing a pale wooden floor. I sold the couch and replaced a lot of the pictures on the walls. I drove all the

way to Galena one weekend to buy a round table in an antique store there; then I drove back and put it in the dining room.

About the time I was twelve, the attic was turned into a spacious panelled bedroom for me (the advantages of only-childhood). I had previously slept in a small room beside my parents' bedroom, so when I inherited the house I had three bedrooms to choose from. Extreme psychic discomfort kept me from adopting my parents' room. I spent one night unable to close my eyes there. Then I tried the little room. That also failed to take. A visiting lover's annoyance (the room wasn't meant to hold a doublebed) directed me upstairs where I decided to stay.

Sometimes it seemed absurd having an entire house below me, several rooms to use, but choosing mostly to stay in just one. It's a long room, running the length of the house, with windows at either end. The walls go up to your shoulder then slope overhead, following the angle of the roof. Bookcases were put in around the landing at the west end where the stairs come up, and a desk was built into the wall beside the eastern window; a window-bench was placed beneath the western one at the head of the stairs. Drawers were built into the walls, as were closets with louvered sliding doors. The room had a self-contained feel, separate. I am the one most responsible for its history. This is not true of the kitchen, living room, my parents' bedroom.

The color TV was put in the little room where I used to sleep. It got me downstairs. I watched the news and movies and Cub games. I could enjoy using the kitchen, but I especially liked the Summer room. My father had built the Summer room where the garage was supposed to be. Two of the walls were floor-to-ceiling screens, the others were of blonde wood. In season, the room opened to the backyard and garden. There are two maple trees in that yard, now grown very tall. My friends and I would sit up late in the Summer room, smoking incessantly and talking.

Each night I washed my face in the bathroom. Listened through the wall to the late news recap of the ballgames. Then I would turn everything off and go down the brief hall to the stairs and sleep; vague expectations of work the next day.

Edgar King, or E. H. King as he is known in the trade, has spent nearly all of his 69 years around Chicago, primarily in Evanston. He has tickets every year to the Civic Opera (his favorite), the Symphony and Goodman Theater and I worked at the fine and rare book auction house that he owns and runs. An avid collector, he opened the place in the Fifties on the North Shore with his brother (now dead) then moved it to the first ultra-swank suburban shopping center. This move was what he calls "one of my lucky hunches." Outside the immediate environs of the city his clientele actually increased. I wouldn't have figured it that way but that's the way it happened. Business was very successful.

I had been out of college a couple of years, kicking around with my liberal arts and not much else when I walked into E. H. King and made out an application. Sick of doing shit work for the minimum wage I jumped when Mr. King said he would hire me on as an apprentice cataloger at $600 a month. Rent was all of $150 in those days and there were regular raises so before long I was doing pretty well. Stealthy old bachelor that he was, I learned that E. H. hired me because he liked having young men around.

I often wondered how I managed to stay on with E. H. King. I do not share his sexual inclinations and he could care less about the Cubs. Neither, for that matter, did any of my fellow employees: Scott, 30 years-old and Vice President, an overachieving capitalist and driven fag; Barney, a young U. of C. pedant (like me before him, this was his first 'real' job) and Richard, pronounced Rishard, a 21 year-old whiz kid from Paris that E. H. picked up somehow around Northwestern. There was a woman in the shop. Sally, our token welcome mat, liked the White Sox because, she said, they spell it with an 'x'.

I didn't talk a lot on this job but I generally tried to be helpful and I guess I held up my end. Still, history had its own momentum. One day Rishard asked me if I was enjoying myself and I had nothing to tell him. I told myself I was figuring things out -- maybe I'd find a lot of money in the street.

Maybe the Cubs would win the pennant. When they beat the Mets the Pirates had lost to the Padres, putting the Cubs solely in first place and on the front page of every newspaper in the city. First place at the All-Star break: exciting but nothing really unusual. The Cubs were usually in the thick of it up to this point; it was the dog days and September where they would blow it. Remember 1969? They led the League all season to disintegrate in the last two weeks; a bloody, ignominious time. I went to college and got into drugs.

I could detect concern in E. H.'s dealings with me. I had been calling in sick -- gone to a couple of weekday games -- but E. H. knew about my parents and he turned his head at my occasional absenteeism, in fact he even gave me a slight raise. I appreciated these things but I appreciated them the way I appreciate monumental sculpture. I looked, I nodded.

In the mornings I awakened in my teenage room. Usually a glass of orange juice, shower, cereal, a cigarette and I was off. The way to work was a straight line on an over-crowded highway, marred by last winter's potholes. Shopping centers, discount stores, gas stations, motels, miniature golf courses were lined one after another in a way that made it seem like they were being held for reassignment someplace else where they were needed. But they weren't needed. They sat in the weather and deteriorated through season after season. There were plenty of places to buy liquor along this road. It took me a half hour to go thirteen miles.

When I got to E. H. King I would find a large showroom arranged in two major sections. The front section was for reception and display; the rear contained the desks where we inspected the volumes consigned for auction and prepared catalogues. A wall divided this showroom from a storage area for additional books, shipping and personal belongings. This room was the morning's first stop. Scott and Barney were drinking coffee.

Barney: "...I wrote my senior thesis on Peru."

Scott: "I don't know anything about Peru. I know a lot about Angola -- and Germany," sipping his coffee, "I don't know anything about America."

Barney: "I know a lot about American history -- but nothing about America."

In the office I saw E. H. King smiling that enigmatic smile I couldn't interpret -- often it came just before disaster. "Did you go to that game yesterday?" I told him that I didn't and he smiled and resumed his correspondence.

The first time I made love I was not in Mt. Prospect. The fleeting thought crossed my mind that had it been there perhaps I would not have been able to return as I did. I was not sure why this should be and it was time for lunch.

I measured my mornings. Tried carefully not to look at the clock until at least 11:30. At 1:00 I was prepared to go. I liked leaving at the halfway point in the day because

then I knew there would be less time in front of me than behind when I got back. I put my pencil down, nodded to Scott and walked out. I went a block away for Oriental food.

After the snow melted and the Spring had come, I started eating lunch at Super Snacks. It's a little place in a drive-up shopping plaza just down the road from the mall where I worked. I was feeling the need for a change, so one day I got in the car and decided to eat in the first place I found. Super Snacks is pretty unobtrusive and I almost passed it by for the hot dog stand a little further up, but I stuck with my intention and pulled in.

Through the door I discovered a long narrow room. All white light, formica and soiled linoleum with a stainless steel cafeteria-type tray rail down one side and tables every place else. Behind that rail were the usual plastic cases full of desserts and fruit; the counter behind which the family worked.

It wasn't much later I found out the place was run by a family of transplanted Vietnamese. There was a mother, a father, and three brothers and two sisters who appeared to range in age from about 14 to 25. The menu ran across the wall behind them as they worked. Ham and eggs or sausages or what they called bacon; about thirty kinds of sandwiches, chili in the bowl, ice cream, shakes, fries. At lunch the "Home-cooked specialties": sweet and sour pork, fried rice, boneless chicken, beef chow mein, egg rolls, combination

plate. This food was good and cheap. It was a good place to eat but I found that another reason I went there was so that I could try saying a few words to Fee.

Fee was the younger daughter. I guessed she was about 20. On that first day I ordered a hamburger and slid my tray to the cash register where she stood. She was talking to her father in Vietnamese with a voice that rose and fell like starling's song, then she turned and looked down and up at me and said, "Would you like anything more, sir?" I bought my hamburger and sat down, glad to look at her.

I became a regular at Super Snacks after that. Soon Fee was recognizing me. She would ask, "How are you today, sir?" and I would tell her, "Fine, thank you, how are you?" She would smile quickly and look away saying, "I'm fine." She would give me my change; her hand was small and very dry.

I would sit facing the rear of the place so that I might see her when I chose. Above me, on the plaster beam, a paper cut-out of an ice cream cone was pasted over a Coke legend. There was a hand lettered sign, "enjoy MILK SHAKE." I heard the rapidly jumping inflections of Fee's speech, repeating orders, calling back and forth.

They were a strikingly handsome family and they worked hard, were always on the move. The father was a slight man in a white shirt, sleeves rolled, black-rimmed glasses, a shock of black hair falling in his eyes. His wife's lips were thin, her jaw was tense -- she would cook in back then

move among the tables, cleaning up, her hair tied in a scarf and wearing the same shirt every day -- I noticed a tear under the left arm. All their children had smooth, clear skin. The boys were growing taller than their father; they were bright eyed and athletic like gymnasts. Both the girls were beautiful.

The eldest was surprisingly large boned and breasted. She wore make-up, her English was good; one moment she seemed vivacious, the next exhausted. You could often see her talking with the fashionable young women who came in from the shopping mall. She seemed to spend less time in the place than her other family members. I frequently saw her sitting in the backroom, just beyond the hanging curtain that served as a door, smoking a cigarette, her chin on her fist.

Fee did not wear make-up. Her black hair was lustrous, parted down the middle and cut just past her shoulders. Once, when she stepped from behind the cash register, I saw she was wearing shoes with impossibly high heels. But I am getting ahead of myself.

It took me several weeks to ask her what her name was. Sometimes it is hard for me to ask the simplest questions. She had been the first to crack the routine of our daily exchange. It was the week before Memorial Day and there was no one in line behind me. I paid, as usual, then she looked at me and said something. I stopped in my tracks, just listening to her voice. I could feel the psychic dust

settling around my feet and I didn't want it to settle; I asked her to repeat herself -- I hadn't understood her --she did, slowly. She wondered if I was going to have a day off. I told her I was and asked her the same. She replied but again I could barely understand her. I smiled a lot and nodded my head like a lame goose. She looked at me. I wanted to continue speaking; I felt as though I had just blundered on to the edge of some kind of secret but I did not know what it was; had she said something more than that she too had the day, a day, off? I couldn't tell. She indicated the calendar. Yes, yes, I said, I was looking forward to it. She looked at me again: nothing. A feeling came over me that I was afraid might be fear. I could not take my eyes off her; I could think of nothing to say. She said, "Sit down, I will bring your plate."

"Thank you," I said.

A week passed. Memorial Day passed -- I spent it drinking at George's, watching the Cubs lose to the Phillies on TV -- then it was back to work and back to lunch. I ordered a bowl of chili and went down the line. I asked Fee how she was, had she had a nice holiday? She said yes, very nice. She gave me my change. I stood there. "Say, my name is Brinker, Stan Brinker, what's yours?"

She looked at the counter a second, "Oh, my name is Fee." She looked up, "F-E-E."

There could be no doubt. I wanted to laugh but I didn't. "How ya doin'?"

Fee laughed.

After that I ate strictly from the homecooked menu. I would ask Fee what was good and she would tell me. When it came to talking about food, her English was perfect. One day the best was sweet and sour pork. As she handed me my plate she asked if I came a long way to work. I told her I drove from Mt. Prospect. She brightened. She told me her family lived in Elk Grove -- nearby. Perhaps, I said, we passed each other on the road in the mornings. She doubted it, they had to be up very early in the morning to serve breakfast. Ah, I see. Now we shared a pleased look.

The sweet and sour pork was especially good. I had understood every word. Fee was ringing through another customer. Her head was just above the register. Someone had taped a magazine photo of the Grand Canyon on the register's back. Fee looked up and I thought she glanced my way.

Poised between the cash register and the hotplates, looking above the tables and the scattered, nodding heads to the streaming traffic outside, Fee presented an elegance that cooled and quickened me. I saw no artifice, no waste about her. Her eyes seemed very old and very young. It was early afternoon but it might have been midnight, 2:00 A.M., dawn, anytime -- she was this composed. She turned her head to the side; the motion was minimal, regal. She had the perfection of a bird's wing -- like a wing she was moving again. I watched her go as I was used to watching her go. There was noise everywhere around her. The cash register

clanks and rings, coffee pours into cups, fingers are aimed at silverware, plastic strikes countertop. Fee was calm in the center of all this. I could hear her talking. She talks a little bit, she talks a little bit more; she extends her oar into the waters as she floats by -- I wondered how deep. I waved to her when I left.

At five o'clock I was always promptly out the door, in my car and on my way home. The radio came on with the ignition; I dialed to hear the outcome of the day's game. Cubs won, 5-1. Briggs scattered seven hits, was never seriously in trouble. Robinson hit another homerun, so did Lynn Moreau. The Cubs are headed into the season's second half, tied for first and who knows, maybe the Pirates will lose tonight.

I had understood almost every word Fee said.

Home at last, I kicked off my shoes and went into the little room to turn on the TV and roll a joint. An unseasonably cool July; low pollen count.

Not long before at work I had been cataloging an Iowa atlas, compiled in 1879. It included a history of the Northwest territory with a description of Chicago. For some reason I typed the description up and put it in my wallet for future reference. I unfolded the piece of paper and read: "This mysterious, majestic, mighty city, born first of water, and next of fire; sown in weakness, and raised in power; planted among the willows of the marsh, and crowned

with the glory of the mountains; sleeping on the bosom of the prairie, and rocked on the bosom of the sea, the youngest city of the world, is the eye of the prairie, as Damascus, the oldest city of the world, is the eye of the desert. With a commerce far exceeding that of Corinth on her isthmus, in the highway to the East; with the defenses of a continent piled around her by the thousand miles, making her far safer than Rome on the banks of the Tiber; with schools eclipsing Alexandria and Athens; with liberties more conspicuous than those of the old republics; with a heroism equal to the first Carthage, and with a sanctity scarcely second to that of Jerusalem -- set your thoughts on all this, lifted into the eyes of all men by the miracle of its growth, illuminated by the flame of its fall, and transfigured by the divinity of its resurrection and you will feel as I do, the utter impossibility of compassing this subject as it deserves."