

Ransom Seaborn

BILL DEASY



velluminous

Published by Velluminous Press
www.velluminous.com

Copyright ©2006 Bill Deasy
www.billdeasy.com

The author asserts the moral right to be
identified as the author of this work.

ISBN-13: 978-1-905605-08-8
ISBN-10: 1-905605-08-0

All Rights Reserved. No part of this
publication may be reproduced, stored in a
retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by
any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying,
recording or otherwise, without the prior
permission of the copyright owner.

cover illustration by Elspeth Fahey

Ransom Seaborn

for
Holden

The shower water felt like tiny pebbles on my skin. It had been days, maybe even a week. I put on fresh jeans and a t-shirt, and set up shop at this worn, nicked, underused desk. PowerBook, 20 ounce Styrofoam coffee cup, ashtray, cigarettes—all the essentials.

It's raining outside, a fine mist. I hear it just barely against the window—imaginary childhood horses rushing toward me from beyond the pale. I'm trying not to think too much about what I'm writing...what I'm doing here. I guess I have a story to tell you.

Here goes nothing.



Chapter One

A tweed oval rug covered the center of the black-speckled dark green floor. Three pairs of shiny dress shoes were placed neatly beneath one of the two single beds. The corner desk was blottered, calendered and armed for academic warfare. A framed and autographed picture of George Bush sat atop a nearby dresser.

When the letter came informing me that I would be living in Jefferson, a dormitory normally reserved for juniors and seniors, I didn't question my good fortune. How perfect, I thought, to have freshman orientation—two full days—to ease into my new environment without the distraction of the swarming masses. My visions of isolated grandeur were shattered when we discovered room 223 already inhabited.

"Looks like your roommate's already moved in, Dan," said my mother, who has a flair for stating the obvious.

At that moment we heard the sound of a toilet flushing, a faucet running, a door opening, and loud, slow footsteps squeaking down the hall. Time stood still as we awaited the author of the steps.

"Hi there," he said when he finally appeared in the doorway making the face I later learned was his smile. "My name's Matt Price. Hope you don't mind. I took the liberty of claiming the far bed."

"Hi, Matt," my parents replied, too quickly, too enthusiastically, extending their hands and offering introductions.

"Dan Finbar," I said when my turn came, "but people call me Fin, or Finbar."

For as long as I could remember that was how I had introduced myself. It was rare that anyone outside my family called me by my first name. My little sister, Sara, chuckled. She did that a lot.

"Do you play?" Matt asked formally, pointing at the battered, black guitar case I still held in my left hand.

"No, Matt, I just carry this around to stay pumped," is what my snide alter ego said in my head—an unspoken jab made all the more biting for the lack of musculature on my slight frame.

"Yeah," I replied.

"I play trumpet," he offered, his braces glinting in the afternoon sun. Did he think we would jam? Was he picturing wild Muppet-like impromptu trumpet-guitar concerts on lazy Sunday afternoons? I couldn't help staring at him. He looked like a marionette chiseled from dried mud; a claymation figure—what's-his-name—the elf who wanted to be a dentist. He wore stiff, navy blue jeans, a short-sleeved brown and white-checked shirt and dark brown Docksidors. It appeared as though the entire ensemble, and him along with it, had been dry cleaned recently, heavy starch. His flat face bore wire-rimmed glasses and a pained expression beneath brown crew cut hair.

"I'm in the ROTC," he explained as we headed for the stairs. "We had to come a week early for drills and stuff."

His voice possessed a nasally timbre; a distinct, whiny quality.

"What's the ROTC?" I asked.

"Reserve Officers' Training Corps. It means the military pays my way, and they get four years of my life when I graduate."

"A military man," my father observed too cheerfully. "Where are you from, Matt?"

"A rinky-dink little town called Dillsburgh, just outside of Harrisburg. I'm sure you've never heard of it."

Sara mouthed the words "rinky-dink" and bit her lower lip to keep from laughing as the five of us emerged from Jefferson. We transferred the rest of my belongings from the car to the room in one trip, then Matt directed us to the gymnasium in the center of Alumni Hall where an opening convocation was scheduled.



The basketball hoops had been ratcheted up and a makeshift stage assembled in front of the locker room doors. The maple bleachers and fold out chairs, which covered the court, were filled nearly to capacity. My parents, Sara and I found an empty space at the top of the stands.

After a heart-felt prayer from Reverend Jones, President Jonathon Phillips towered before us.

"Welcome parents, brothers, sisters, friends and, most importantly, you new bright lights of Harrison College," he belted across the pin-drop silent auditorium, a balding bear of a man, a physical and intellectual giant. "It is with great excitement and eager anticipation that I stand here this afternoon and urge you, urge all of you, parents and children alike, to prepare for change—the changing circumstances which result from technology and innovation in our lives."

As our esteemed leader proceeded to discuss the invention of electricity and the deep, social transformation it brought about, I stared around at my empty-eyed classmates and their sad, hopeful parents, all gazing forward, expectantly searching the air for a behavioral blueprint, an easy-to-follow guide to letting go, moving on.

"Our faith in Christ is constant and eternal," Dr. Phillips finally summarized, his voice rising in fervent exclamation. "It doesn't change with scientific discoveries or technological advances. It is there as our foundation in this age and in ages to come. It is the bedrock for our college and our lives."

The applause was deafening. I sat motionless, a Catholic fish in deep, Presbyterian water. (Did I mention that Harrison is a shining bastion of free-market economics and good old white-sleeved Christian fundamentalism? My parents were both liberal leaning Catholics. I'm still not sure how I wound up there.)

Afterwards, following a late lunch at McDonald's, which Sara spent pinching her nose and practicing her Matt Price imitation, a strange silence filled my head. I struggled to conceal my dread when my teary mother hugged me and wished me well. My father shook my hand firmly, nearly pulling my arm from its socket.

"We love you, Dan," he said, meeting my eyes with his own, trying to reassure me. "You're gonna be fine."

"Make sure you talk to people," my mom added, as she wound down the passenger-side window and blew me a kiss.

"Come home soon," Sara called. "But not too soon."

I smiled back weakly. A dull ache spread through my suddenly shallow chest cavity as I stood on the sidewalk watching them begin their drive back to Pittsburgh.

Late that night, after a cookout on the soccer field and a 'Welcome Freshmen' party in the crepe-papered intramural

room, I lay awake on my rickety new bed staring at the ceiling. Laughter trickled in through the open window. The life-long home in which I'd awoken that morning was now a lost, distant continent. I fell asleep slowly to the sound of Matt Price's whistling nose.



Day two of orientation was filled with more forced socialization. Between the chaotic soccer free-for-all and the late-day picnic, I managed to steal some alone time and explore the well-kept Harrison grounds. Following cement pathways through the interlacing rectangles that made up the campus, I breathed in the rarefied country air and familiarized myself with the spaces among and around the school buildings.

My thoughts flickered between my old and new worlds. Memories of the past twenty four hours, the longest of my life, mingled with still-fresh images from last week's string of good-bye parties, an entire summer of drunken revelry. And there were other memories, too, older ones, of the childhood that had ended. My mother holding my small boy-hand as we walked the beach in New Jersey. ("Each squeeze is a word," she'd explained gently. "I—LOVE—YOU.") Lazy, after-school sitcoms we'd all seen at least twice. My brother, three sisters and I seated along with our parents at the dinner table, our hands joined in mumbled prayer. The life that was forever beyond my backwards reach.



The first day of classes found me standing beneath the Underhill Hall clock collecting my bearings amid a torrent of students, all of whom seemed to know where they were going. Plastic plaques engraved with room numbers hung in

neat rectangles above each door. I followed their trail to 112, Literature 101. Dr. Julia Mabry greeted us with a gentle smile and a nervous laugh.

"Many of you are freshmen," she began. "Welcome to Harrison."

Introduction to Government came next. It was taught by the adorable, if somewhat unintelligible, Ray Rider with his buzz cut and signature quote, "I can feel for you but I can't quite reach you." He passed out copies of the course syllabus and proceeded to spin a web of unconnected anecdotes.

Creative Writing concluded my first day of classes. Dr. William Exley, the only communist on the faculty, ambled among us, wild-eyed and eager to offend.

"Can anyone tell me what good writing is?" he began. Our silence goaded him. "Come on, I presume you all have the ability to speak. What is good writing?"

Still nothing. He perched on the edge of his desk and pulled a folded sheet of paper from his shirt pocket. It was a letter he had received that morning from a former student.

"I had him back in Harrison's heyday," he joked, "before the administration had so successfully purged the campus of personality. I always knew he was special." He enunciated his words in such a way that everything he said could be construed as sarcasm. "Now he's a novelist, if you can believe that," he continued. "And a damn fine one I might add. See what you all can accomplish if you'll only follow my simple instructions?"

He put on his glasses and speed-muttered the first few paragraphs to himself until he came to the portion he wanted to share with us, dramatically clearing his throat before quoting:

What have I learned about love, you ask. Only that it's a very hard game to master, and luck has a lot to do with the outcome.

Though I've been married and divorced, I understand next to nothing about love.

But no, I take that back. I have learned a couple of things from Stephanie, the woman with whom I have enjoyed, for the past three years, a relationship more satisfying than my marriage was. Before we moved in together, I had thought myself much better at divorce than marriage (my ex-wife and I must have set a record for efficiency and swiftness), but now it becomes clear that I would have been good at marriage if I'd chosen a compatible partner. That's one thing I've learned.

The second thing is that there are three major stages to any love affair, as there are to most of life's processes, I suspect: the preamble, the mainbody, and the end. The reason love makes clowns out of so many of us, and brings so many of us to grief, is that parts one and two are so dissimilar. I'm talking about the heart-stopping thrill of falling in love, as opposed to the placid, satisfied existence enduring love settles into. What's the connection? How can one possibly understand the peacefulness of floating down a slow stream in a canoe when one's only experience with water has been going over the falls?

He shoved the wrinkled paper back into his front pocket, a satisfied grin on his face. "Now, that is good writing," he exclaimed. "God, I love good writing."

He concluded the class that morning by saying, "Just write brilliantly," and urging us to go familiarize ourselves with the library. Rather than risk a conversation over lunch, I did as he suggested and headed for the stacks.



The Charles Pavlick Memorial Library was located in front of the computer center and stood parallel with my dorm, though separated by a football field-sized lawn. I entered through the rear and was assaulted instantly by mugginess. Students anx-

ious to get a jump on their work would do so at the risk of heat stroke.

I went through the front lobby, past the check out and information desks, and turned left down the wide center aisle. Sunlight streamed through a row of high, rectangular windows on the south wall, giving the space a dusty, heavenly appearance. The carpeted main room was unoccupied and stood in stark contrast to the metallic, two-story sidecar section that housed the majority of the books. I walked among the stacks perusing titles, noticing an abundance of religious and political texts. Finally, upstairs, I found the meager collection of fiction. I scanned the rows until finding the works of J.D. Salinger. Two years earlier, while still nestled in the heart of high school in Pittsburgh, I read *The Catcher in the Rye* for the first time. It became the language of our small group in Senior English, often quoted and openly revered. It stood now as a symbol of lost security. I retrieved a copy and sat down at the nearest desk.

When I looked up, I noticed a thin, wiry student writing furiously at the table to my right. His left hand supported his tilting head, fingers buried in the disheveled black strands. He wore faded jeans, a faded black t-shirt and faded black boots. His flexed left biceps gave his writing the appearance of an athletic activity. He glanced in my direction and I returned my attention to the world of Holden Caulfield's New York City.



As high-noon yellow gave way to mellow, late-day blue, I entered my dorm and climbed the stairs to the second floor. Inserting my key into the door lock, I noticed the mad writer from the library doing the same two doors down. An unlit cigarette dangled from his closed mouth and a brown notebook was tucked under his left arm. Again I stared and again he caught me, before disappearing into his room.



Matt Price's loud entrance awakened me. He stood for an instant in the doorway's rectangular coffin of light before flipping the switch and rousing me for certain.

"Hi," he droned, seeming not to notice that I'd been sleeping. "You know why they called it Jefferson?"

Matt was in the habit of imparting Harrison trivia whenever the mood hit. Learning the history of our college was an integral part of his ROTC training, and he liked to spread the informational wealth.

"No," I answered, raising myself into a seated position. "Why did they call it Jefferson, Matt?"

"Herbert Jefferson, class of '49," he spouted. "He was this, like, world famous laissez-faire economist...gave Harrison scads of money."

I allowed a moment to give the appearance of digesting this startling new information then asked, "What's the deal with the guy in 219?"

"Ransom Seaborn," he replied.

"You know him?" I followed. "What's his name again? Ransom Seaborn?"

"Ransom Seaborn," he repeated as if he couldn't believe it himself. "No one knows him. He's, like, this mystery man who doesn't talk to anyone. If you say 'Hi' to him he acts like you're not even there." Matt's voice began to pitch up. He was visibly enlivened by this visit to the rumor mill. "I don't know. I didn't hear this first hand, obviously, but a friend of mine said he killed someone when he was in high school and his parents sent him here to straighten him out."

"He a junior?" I asked, not quite able to digest the whole murderer-next-door thing.

"Yeah," he replied. "He has the only single in the building." Matt removed the sweater he had worn to his afternoon class and replaced it with another, à la Mister Rogers.

"You wanna go to dinner over at Block?" he asked. Of the two cafeterias on campus, Block tended to draw the upper-classmen.

"Yeah," I replied, thinking if I played my cards right I might not meet another freshman all year. Who knew? Maybe some day I'd be the murderer next door.



Matt went to see "American Graffiti" in the Lawford Auditorium that night so I had the room to myself. I called home and assured my parents I was doing fine then took a run on my first batch of homework. By ten o'clock, I'd had enough. I grabbed my worn copy of *Franny and Zooey* and headed off in the direction of the Student Union, known for some reason as 'The Podunk.' Ransom Seaborn emerged from his room as I approached it and couldn't help noticing me.

"Well, if it isn't the staring man," he said dryly. "And a Salinger fan, to boot," he added, noticing my book.

"You read it?" I asked, hearing my voice sounding cool and detached, even as my pulse quickened.

"Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on my soul," he answered, quoting the mantra Franny repeats to herself in the story, then continued by me in the opposite direction.



I spent the night reading and roaming the campus. Standing at the bottom of the main quadrangle, I stared up at the clock illuminated atop Rockwell, the science building. A busload of students returning from an off-campus party unloaded noisily at the entrance to the college. Their voices rose and fell, as though unified, and moved closer through the night. I

stood still, an invisible, human arrow, dividing them as they passed.

I recognized some of them as fellow freshmen and wondered how they had managed to assimilate so easily. I seemed always stuck on the precipice between self-doubt and excitement, a state that rendered me useless, socially speaking (and often still does). I was the lonely boy clinging to the belief that the party would one day be magically delivered to his doorstep.



Among the many confounding policies of Harrison College was the existence of Saturday classes. Accounting 101, the course that would forever save the business world from my presence, met bright and early the next morning. My alarm clock sounded at 7:45 and I shuffled sleepily down the hallway to the communal bathroom. As I passed room 219, I heard the soft strands of a familiar Van Morrison song, *Into the Mystic*. I was briefly transported back to a hundred overcast afternoons, lying on my bed, listening to my brother's records, discovering music.

Entering yet another cloudless day, I covered the short distance between Jefferson and Lawford, determined to befriend the quiet guy with the strange name. Ransom Seaborn.

Opportunity knocked quickly. After leaving class, I decided to swallow my fears and go alone to the cafeteria for breakfast after days of eating peanut butter and jelly in my room. I pushed my plastic tray along the metal conveyor, then scanned the room for a place to park.

Ransom sat alone in the far corner. I passed the rows of half-filled tables, turned down the last aisle, and took the seat across from him.

"I heard Van Morrison coming from your room this morning," I ventured. "I love that album."

No reply. His mouth was full.

"Ever heard *Astral Weeks*?" I asked.

Still nothing. I persevered.

"I saw Van Morrison last summer at the Merriwether Post Pavilion in Maryland. It was amazing. He did a ten minute version of *Sweet Thing*." Finally he looked up at me. "I couldn't believe it," I continued. "I almost had a heart attack."

"I have heard *Astral Weeks*," he said.

Although I already knew his name, I thought the possibility of our friendship might be made official if he told me himself so I said, "My name's Dan Finbar. Most people call me Fin."

"Ransom Seaborn," he replied faintly. "See you round, Fin."

He lifted his tray and carried it to the dishwashers' window. Not a clear victory, but I'd take it.



Much of my free time was spent browsing the freshman directory and falling in love with various female strangers. Their 1 inch by 1 inch black and white faces smiled up at me, instilling hope. It never occurred to me that I would have to actually speak to one of them in order to begin any kind of emotional or physical interaction. I imagined it all just kind of happening one day by chance, when they finally saw the light and heard me singing and playing my guitar as they walked along the sidewalk beneath my second story window.

"Hello up there," they would yell between nervous giggles. "I don't mean to be forward—or maybe I do—but do

you think I could come up to your room and introduce myself?"

"Come on up," I would say offhandedly, the very model of enigmatic detachment. (This, of course, hearkens back to that party-at-my-doorstep thing.)

And so it was that first Saturday night. I passed the time leafing through the directory between heart-rending musical outpourings beside the open window. Following a particularly powerful reading of my latest composition, I halted my unattended concert to go relieve myself.

Ransom stood at the far sink scrubbing a spot on his shirt. I walked over to the urinal and went about my business, playing it cool.

"That you singing?" he asked my image in the mirror.

"Yeah," I replied, staring at the wall, embarrassed by how loud I must have been but hearing no annoyance in the inquiry.

"So you're into Salinger," he continued—his voice thick and sugary. "Have you ever read his short stories?"

"Yeah," I replied, washing my hands in the basin two over from his.

"I like that one, *A Perfect Day For Banana Fish*. Remember that?" he asked as he opened the door and waited for me to walk out in front of him. I smelled the alcohol on his breath as I passed.

"Drinking is forbidden here, you know," I said with mock severity. "I could have you thrown out for this."

"You wouldn't do that," he assured me in an exaggerated whisper as we moved down the hall. "You like J.D. Salinger. Care for a cocktail, Finbar?"

"Sure," I replied, stunned by the invitation, and followed him as he opened and entered his room.

It looked like a monk lived there. Two photographs, indistinguishable in the near darkness and pasted to the wall

above the head of his unmade bed, were the only signs of personality. Nick Drake sang from the windowsill and cigarette smoke wafted through the stale air. I pulled the chair out from under his candle-lit desk as he lifted a half-filled gallon jug of Mad Dog 20/20 from the closet.

"I do remember *Banana Fish*," I said. "That's the one about the guy who talks with that little girl in the ocean then goes and kills himself, right? I think my favorite is *The Laughing Man*, though. Do you remember it, about the guy who tells the kids that story?"

He didn't answer. He handed me a cafeteria glass filled with the cheap red wine, then took a seat on the bed. The first sip warmed my blood.

"Where're you from?" I asked.

"Hanover, New Hampshire," he replied, lighting his next cigarette with the butt of his last one. "Live free or die."

"I have a friend who worked at a camp near there last summer. I can't remember the name."

"There are hundreds of camps around there," he explained. "Parents send their kids away to get sunburned and socialized, among other things."

Smoke streamed from his mouth and nostrils. He flicked his ash into an empty Coke can. The angles of his face—his jaws, his cheeks—were so severe it almost looked like he was wearing stage make-up. Hamlet of Hanover.

"Something with the word 'moose' in it, I think," I said. "How'd you end up here?"

"A friend of my dad's came here a long time ago. My dad thought it might have a calming effect on me."

I recalled the theory Matt had shared. Ransom seemed to read my mind. "What'd you hear?" he asked. "That I killed a kid in high school or that I was a star witness in a big Mafia trial? Or is there a new story floating around?"

"Killed a kid in high school," I confessed.

"Not true. Sorry to disappoint you. I was tempted a few times."

My fourth glass of Mad Dog found us engaged in a heated debate over the meaning of a Van Morrison song, *Madame George*.

"It's about a drag queen," he insisted, now flagrantly inebriated.

"No way," I countered. "It's about a heroin addict. I read it somewhere." We played the song over and over and paused the disc on lines particularly crucial to our arguments.

When we finished the bottle, Ransom suggested we walk into Pembroke to buy cigars. Stone steps guided us away from the halls of academe, towards the quaint, small town of Pembroke, Pennsylvania. The firmament loomed clear and dazzling overhead. I wondered aloud if clouds even existed in this strip of Pennsylvania sky. Maybe God wanted Harrison to remain in a constant state of atmospheric stability, so as not to distract his children from their heavenly endeavors.

I was drunk.

"I have to take a piss," Ransom said, and we stopped to water the parched earth of the short-cut path to Main Street.

Standing there, pecker in hand, I stared up at the leafy branches swaying in the breeze, saw the moon beaming between them, and felt blessedly connected to it all. In my brief drinking history, such moments of spiritual euphoria were common.

"Do you believe in God?" I asked, awaiting his zip and turn.

"Who cares if I believe there's a God?" he replied as we resumed our mission. "Of course there's a fucking God!" He stretched his arms out to his sides and twirled, tripping and nearly falling. "Look at all this. The sky, the trees, the air. There's a God, all right. A mean, fucking practical joker of a

God. An all powerful blind ass yank-your-chain God." His voice rose as if to be sure the Creator got every word.

He then stopped in his tracks, leaned back and screamed at the top of his lungs—no words, just a string of unintelligible vowels, a cry of agony I drunkenly mistook for silliness.

"I have no response to that," I replied.

We purchased our stogies and zig-zagged down Main Street, puffing away. At the edge of town, past the railroad tracks and the beer distributor, Ransom ducked down a thin, gravel trail between the Catholic church and Owen's Dry Cleaners.

We emerged into a hidden clearing I discovered was a cemetery. I squatted and strained to see the nearest scarred headstone, 'Hannah, wife of Lewis Griffith.' I read the epitaph aloud:

*Farewell, my husband, you I leave
Though sad and surely you may grieve
This grave contains your humble bride
And your sweet babe lies by my side.*

It was dated 1838.

"Man, this place is old," I noted as I stood.

"I found it my first week at Harrison," Ransom explained. "I come here to be with my mother. Crazy, huh? I come to a place 500 miles from where she's buried just to talk to her."

Somehow, I knew not to say anything, nor to ask any of the questions. He turned away, the camaraderie of the evening lost in the depth of his reflection. There were no more Van Morrison debates or spontaneous philosophical discourses. There was only silence and the faint outline of a dead woman's ghost. The wind turned colder and I shivered as we retreated back to campus.



Lawford Hall sat on the entrance edge of the campus, perfectly parallel with Amberson Chapel. When visitors arrived, this was the building where they first stopped. It housed the offices of the president and his assistant, the Alumni Relations staff, Student Affairs Personnel and the *Harrison Herald*, and looked from a distance, and even up close, like a medieval monastery. It also contained the auditorium that, by day, was the drafty, dungeon-house of torturous accounting classes. Soon, it became my own private Radio City Music Hall.

Since orientation, I had seen the signs advertising a freshman talent contest, but only found the courage to enlist the day before. Though I had happily performed for family and friends since childhood, three hundred strangers was a different matter all together.

"I'm old enough to vote now, and fight my country's wars," I sang when my turn finally arrived, a telling tremolo in my voice, my nervous fingers moving awkwardly along the fret board. "And soon I'll be allowed to use the local liquor stores."

I selected a song called *Dear David* I wrote the summer before. It was a musical letter to my deceased younger brother and brought him up to speed on all that was happening in our family. By the time I strummed the final chord my nervousness had been replaced by genuine emotion and I stood, swallowing my throat, as the audience cheered.

I returned my guitar to its case and left the building through the stage doors, flying from my first taste of public approval. I hurried around to the main entrance and sneaked into the auditorium, taking a seat in the last row just in time to catch the end of the final contestant's song. He had a beautiful, silky-smooth voice and sang with conviction about his personal Savior. Ransom sat down beside me.

"Is that true?" he asked when the lights came up. The judges had adjourned to deliberate. "Did your brother really die?"

"Yeah," I said. "When we were kids."

"How?" These were the first personal questions Ransom had asked me. I was unaccustomed to being the object of his focus.

"Meningitis," I replied. "He just didn't wake up one morning."

"How old?"

"Eighteen months. I was three."

The din around us escalated as students stood and milled about the sloped assembly hall floor. I noticed Matt Price listening solemnly to a fellow short-hair. I could only imagine what they were discussing.

"How'd your mother die?" I asked.

"She drowned."

"Drowned," I parroted.

"Drowned," he repeated.

"How old were you?"

"Sixteen. It was four years ago this month."

A hush fell over the room as darkness returned. We stopped our exchange and watched the president of the Student Governing Association take center stage and begin his closing spiel, thanking the judges and all of the brave, talented souls who had "strutted their stuff." I was stunned when he announced that I had taken second prize, and found my way in a daze to the stage where I was handed a check for twenty five dollars.

Ransom shook my hand. "Want to go for a victory drive?"

"Sure. Where are we gonna find a car?"

"I have a car," he stated matter-of-factly.

We found his tan, four-door, 1972 Plymouth Scamp in Si-

beria, the student parking lot along the northern ridge of the campus.

"I bought it last summer from an old lady who hardly ever drove it," he said, explaining the automobile's excellent condition. "It only has twenty thousand miles on it."

The steering wheel looked like it belonged on a bus and the front seat felt like a big, vinyl coffin. Ransom reached into the back and pulled out two 12 ounce Budweisers.

"Cheers," he said, before taking the first sip.

We drove aimlessly through the maze of back roads. My sense of Pembroke's status as an isolated small town became more acute with each passing cornfield. Houses were definitely the exception, not the rule. At an early stop sign Ransom put the car in park and set his first empty on the floor. Placing his foot atop it, he touched the sides lightly with his index fingers and the can collapsed easily beneath his weight. I chugged the remains of mine and did the same.

"Shove the empties under the seat," he directed.

We continued our drive through the moonlit countryside, drinking our beers and listening to classic rock on an AM radio station. I was thrilled to be creating a life of adventure away from my home and my old friends. I was proud to have attained the acceptance of this person—two years my elder—I had chosen for my surrogate brother. I was slightly buzzed, happy and alive.

At one point, Ransom surprised me by saying, "My mother was a poet. There's a poem of hers in the anthology Exley uses."

"Pretty serious," I commented.

"She was serious all right...the genuine real deal. When I was a kid I remember our house being full of her friends and her sitting in the middle of the room reciting something. It felt like listening to really good old music. She was tapped in, man."

At that moment it was like a third person joined us in the car: Ransom's sadness. The shift was so dramatic a lump formed in my throat—and I'd never even met the woman. I combated the mood swing by offering some autobiographical tidbits of my own.

"My Aunt Nancy was a contestant on *The Price Is Right* last year."

Nothing.

"My dad's the principal of the school we all went to. Wasn't that bad, though. Everybody liked him."

Still nothing.

"I can't believe I got second prize."

Ransom seemed to grow less sullen. Once the last beer can was stashed, he pulled over to relieve himself. I sat alone in the still-running car when I saw the flashing red light approaching from the rear. It was attached to a Pembroke County Police car.

As the single lawman neared us, cool-hand Ransom yelled in a sober sounding voice, "Lost a hubcap."

There was no response. A flashlight beam danced through the Scamp's dull interior before falling on my expressionless face. The absence of anything incriminating seemed to satisfy the officer, who looked as if his testicles had not yet dropped.

"Any luck?" came his good-natured reply.

I was half tempted to yell out to Ransom, "Hey, it's Gomer Pyle," but I thought that might hurt our chances for a clean get-away.

"Nah," came the comfortable reply. "I think I'll have to come back tomorrow. Find it in the daylight."

The young cop offered to help but Ransom put him off, saying, "I'm not even sure this is where it came off. Better just come back tomorrow. Thanks though."

The six beers I'd consumed, along with my talent show triumph and our run-in with the law, convinced me that the

night was mine and that romance awaited. Back on campus, I coaxed Ransom into going with me to the tail end of a dance in Kessler Rec.

We stood in the corner, drunken wallflowers, and I scanned the floor for faces I recognized. In my head, I converted the small, square directory pictures to life size and searched for matches. I was really looking for Lynn Cussimano (English Major, Toledo, Ohio), with whom I had actually spoken one day as we left the Religious Philosophy class we shared. She was the current leader in the race to be my soul mate.

I spotted her dancing with a female friend in the middle of the crowded room. When the next slow song began, I made my move. I tapped her on the shoulder, interrupting her conversation, and asked, "Can I have this dance?"

"Why, certainly," she replied, her face beaming with friendliness. About halfway through the song we seemed to instinctively pull each other closer. I closed my eyes and breathed in the smell of her hair. Herbal Essence.

The song ended and Lynn asked, "Can we step outside for a minute?" This was going even better than I'd hoped. Standing in the cool, night air, I gazed into her almond eyes awaiting her cue. After what seemed an eternity she said, "Have you been drinking, Finbar?"

It gets fuzzy after that. She became the missionary and I the unconverted native. I mostly tuned out her speech, which revolved around her God and her values and the dangers of alcohol and the fact that I had held her too closely. It became the sound the TV makes when a station runs a test of the emergency broadcasting system.

Finally, sensing a pause that might have been a conclusion, I said, "I'm sorry, Lynn. I did have a little too much to drink tonight. It won't happen again."

I started smiling then; not the conciliatory, self-deprecating smile I intended, but, instead, a shit-eating, maniacal smile

that served to undermine the sincerity of my words. I couldn't help it, though. I was suddenly euphoric.

"You don't look sorry." She turned and strode off in the direction of her dorm.



Back at the dance, Ransom was nowhere to be found. Wanting to tell him about my brush with the moral majority and my strange reaction to it, I left the noisy rec hall and made for our dorm. Before I reached it, though, I saw him in the distance, standing in the center of the East Quadrangle. His arms were outstretched and his face was pointed toward the heavens. Slowly, gracefully, in eerie stillness, his body fell backwards and met the soft earth.