

T. Coraghessan Boyle

Biography

Born Thomas John Boyle, December 2, 1948, in Peekskill, NY; son of a janitor/bus driver and secretary; married Karen Kvashay, 1974; children: Kerrie, Milo, Spencer. *Education*: State University of New York at Potsdam, B.A., 1968; University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, M.F.A., 1974, Ph.D., 1977.

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Career

Published first short story, "The OD and Hepatitis Railroad or Bust," in *North American Review*; fiction editor, *Iowa Review*; published first collection of short stories, *The Descent of Man*, 1979; published first novel, *Water Music*, 1981. University of Southern California, assistant professor of English, 1978–82, associate professor, 1982–86, professor, 1986–.

Awards: PEN/Faulkner Award for novel of the year, for *World's End*, 1988; O. Henry Award for "Sinking House," 1988; O. Henry Award for "The Ape Lady in Retirement," 1989; PEN Award for short story, PEN American Center for *If the River Was Whiskey*, 1990; PEN/Malamud Award for short story, 1999.

Sidelights

Novelist T. C. Boyle creates vivid literary portraits of the more eccentric side of the American landscape in a body of work that spans several novels and dozens of short stories dating back to the early 1980s. His eleventh novel, *Talk Talk*, was published in 2006 and recounted a timely tale of identity theft, told cleverly from both the victim's and the perpetrator's points of view. Other works delve into fictional portrayals of 1960s-era hippies, sex researcher Dr. Alfred Kinsey, and a pair of illegal immigrants living in the forest below a posh Los Angeles neighborhood. Boyle has been called "slightly anarchic and disregarding of convention—a sort of rock-'n'-roll writer" by *New Statesman* critic Keith Martin, and also characterized as America's "poet laureate of humiliation" in a *New York Times Book Review* assessment by Will Blythe. "He loves crackpots in their energizing delusion," Blythe added. "He catalogs foul tempers, exalts bleak humors, and never flinches from a tantrum."

Born in 1948 as Thomas John Boyle, the future author grew up in Peekskill, New York, a town situated at the northern end of Westchester County. His was a working-class household, with his father a school custodian and bus driver, and his mother employed as a secretary. Both died relatively early from alcohol-related health problems, but Boyle

said of them, "they were good parents," he told Dinitia Smith in a *New York Times* interview. "They gave me support and love."

Boyle changed his middle name to Coraghnessan (pronounced "kuh-ragg-issun") when he was 17, to add a bit of panache to it and pay homage to his Irish ancestry. There were few books in his home, yet Boyle's parents encouraged him to do well in school; his idea, however, was to make music his career. Upon his graduation from Lakeland High School, he entered the State University of New York (SUNY) at Potsdam with the intention of pursuing a music major, but failed his audition on the saxophone for the music program. He wound up writing a play for one class that was well received, and the experience sparked his interest in writing as a career.

After graduating from SUNY—Potsdam in 1968, Boyle drifted for several years. He followed his original passion by playing in a rock band; he also picked up his parents' tendency to cope with life via substance abuse when he started using heroin. A friend's overdose convinced him to kick his own habit, and he became a high school teacher at his alma mater. A story he wrote about his drug-dependent period, "The OD and Hepatitis Railroad or Bust," was published in the *North American Review*, and helped him land a spot in the prestigious writers' workshop and M.F.A. program at the University of Iowa. His teachers there included acclaimed American novelists John Irving and John Cheever, and he stayed on after earning his graduate degree in 1974 to pursue a doctorate in literature and serve as fiction editor of the *Iowa Review*.

Boyle joined the faculty of the University of Southern California (USC) in 1978 as an assistant professor of creative writing. A year later, his first collection of short stories appeared in print, *The Descent of Man*, followed by the novel *Water Music* in 1981. The 400-plus-page story was a historical novel of sorts, presenting the story of Mungo Park, a real-life Scottish explorer who traversed unknown parts of Africa in the late 1700s; it also featured his anti-hero counterpart, a London rogue named Ned Rise. The debut novel earned good reviews and established Boyle as a young American writer of note.

In 1984, Boyle's next work, the novel *Budding Prospects: A Pastoral*, was published. Its plot centered around a doomed-to-fail marijuana farm in a remote part of coastal California. Reviewing it for the *New York Times*, Eva Hoffman found some flaws in the characterization of four men who undertake the enterprise, but concluded by asserting that "Boyle possesses a rare and a redeeming virtue—he can be consistently, effortlessly, intelligently funny. Which means that he belongs to a species even harder to locate than a good, solid novelist."

The following year, Boyle's second volume of short fiction, *Greasy Lake and Other Stories*, was published, but his readership expanded considerably in 1987 with the appearance of his third novel, *World's End*. The first of his works to be set in the Hudson River Valley of his youth, the novel follows a journey of self-discovery pursued by a young man named Walter and his search for clues to the identity of his real father. Intertwined with that story are sketches from Peterskill town history dating back to the seventeenth century, and the foibles of two venerable families—Walter's humble one and their perennial nemeses, the Van Wart clan. The lengthy story, noted *New York Times* book

critic Michiko Kakutani, "gives Mr. Boyle lots of room to display his manic gift for language, his love of exaggeration and Grand Guignol effects, his ability to work all sorts of magical variations on literature and history."

World's End won Boyle the PEN/Faulkner Award for best novel of the year. By this point he had been made a full professor at USC, but his teaching schedule allowed him ample time to work on his short stories and novels. Another collection, *If the River Was Whiskey*, appeared in 1990, followed a year later by the novel *East Is East*, a comic tale of a half-American Japanese sailor who seeks asylum in the country he reveres, but winds up hiding out in a writers' colony in coastal Georgia.

Boyle's next novel was the first to be made into a Hollywood movie. *The Road to Wellville*, published in 1993, presented a fictional portrait of two real-life brothers, the Kelloggs of Battle Creek, Michigan, in a story set in the early years of the twentieth century. The inventive brother, who devised a cereal-flaking process that launched the Kellogg Cereal empire, was forced out of the company by his brother, but John Harvey Kellogg's revenge comes in the form of a well-known sanitarium in Battle Creek, where the wealthy and famous come to re-energize through a strict diet and bizarre cure regimens. Oddly, the novel received some of the worst reviews of Boyle's career, with critics almost unanimously describing it as overlong and overwritten.

Boyle's next book, a comic examination of the conundrum of illegal immigration in America, fared better with critics. *The Tortilla Curtain*, published in 1995, presents another intertwined pair of plots: that of an illegal immigrant from Mexico, Candido, along with the motorist whose car hits him on a dark road in Topanga Canyon, where both men live. Candido, however, lives in a makeshift camp in the forest with his pregnant wife, America, while trust-funder Delaney feels guilty about his community's efforts to eradicate the illegal-immigrant encampment from view. The two men's "lives proceed along parallel courses, occasionally intersecting," wrote Barbara Kingsolver in her review for *Nation*, "but while Candido and America vomit in pain, reel with hunger, and are hunted like animals, Delaney's family counts calories and gets depressed over lost pets." Echoing past reviews of his work, Kingsolver noted that Boyle's characters did not seem to be fully developed, but she conceded that "what Boyle does, and does well, is lay on the line our national cult of hypocrisy. Comically and painfully he details the smug wastefulness of the haves and the vile misery of the have-nots."

Boyle continued to find inspiration for his fiction in the real-life tales of American eccentrics. In the mid-1990s, he moved with his family to Santa Barbara, California, and began hearing stories about the new and old fortunes that built the great, oceanview estates of the area earlier that century. He was particularly fascinated by the story of Stanley McCormick, whose family grew immensely wealthy thanks to his father's 1831 farm-reaper invention and the founding of the International Harvester company. Boyle used it as the basis for his 1998 novel, *Riven Rock*. Stanley was an athlete, artist, and Princeton graduate, but suffered from a schizophrenia that worsened considerably a few years into his marriage to Katherine Dexter, an eminent biologist and women's rights advocate. Boyle recounts a fictional portrayal of Stanley, Katherine, and his male caretaker nurses during the 20-year period when he was locked inside his palatial home,

known as Riven Rock, after he started to physically attack any woman he saw, including his wife and sisters. The male nurses who care for him, especially a hard-drinking one named Eddie O'Kane, and the succession of doctors promising Katherine they could cure her husband, round out the rest of a tale that *Booklist*'s Grace Fill called "an imaginative and touching work."

Boyle's short stories continued to appear regularly in the *New Yorker*, *Atlantic*, *Harper's*, and other publications, and were periodically assembled into volumes that included *T. C. Boyle Stories*, a 1998 title, and *After the Plague* in 2001. In the late 1990s, he began to drop the "Coraghessan" from his name. For his 2003 novel, *Drop City*, Boyle returned to the California landscape and the counterculture of the late 1960s and early '70s. The plot centers around members of a California commune who flee north to Alaska, but "the hippies clash with the handful of survivalists and sex-starved bush crazies who live there," noted Lev Grossman in a *Time International* review, "and the slow-motion collision of these two fragile communities makes for an engrossing spectacle." The novel earned Boyle his first nomination for a National Book Award.

Boyle's next effort was the 2004 novel, *The Inner Circle*, which presented a fictional portrayal of mid-twentieth-century sexual-behavior scientist Dr. Alfred Kinsey. The narrator is one of Kinsey's fictional research assistants, and the story centers around the close-knit circle of colleagues whom Kinsey encouraged to free themselves from traditional moral taboos of the era. "What intrigued me most about Kinsey," Boyle explained to Smith in the *New York Times* profile, "is his belief that we are simply animals and that sex is biological. But I started to wonder about the emotional side, the way he ran his own life and controlled the people around him in his mission to record our sexual behavior."

In 2005, a specially selected collection of Boyle's previously published short fiction appeared under the title *The Human Fly and Other Stories*, and was aimed at his unusually high number of teenaged readers. The stories include his classic "Greasy Lake" along with "Love of My Life," about a young couple who try to hide an unplanned pregnancy. The following year, his eleventh novel, *Talk Talk*, was published to excellent reviews. The identity-theft tale centers around a deaf woman whose Social Security number and other personal information have been hijacked by a master thief, and again Boyle presents a dual narrative: one of Dana and her boyfriend's cross-country journey to confront the perpetrator, and that of the villain himself, who uses so many aliases that he can barely recall the true details of his own identity.

Boyle remains a professor at USC, and he and his wife, whom he wed in 1974, have three children. Daughter Kerrie Kvashay-Boyle followed in her father's footsteps at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and has been published in the literary journal *McSweeney's*. Boyle retains much of his iconoclastic aura, showing up at readings in quasi-punk/'70s rocker attire, including his trademark red Converse high-tops. The illicit drugs he gave up long ago remain a distant memory, and he sometimes says that finding his voice through fiction helped him move past his self-destructive tendencies. "Art bailed me out," he told Louisa Ermelino in an interview that appeared in *Publishers Weekly*. "It sounds corny but there's a power in it that I would never give up. There's a light that fills

you when you're writing; there's a magic. I don't know what it is. It's a miracle and it's a rush and immediately on finishing, you want to do it again."

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T. Coraghessan Boyle

GREASY LAKE

It's about a mile down on the dark side of Route 88. —ARUCE SPRINGSTEEN

There was a time when courtesy and winning ways went out of style, when it was good to be bad, when you cultivated decadence like a taste. We were all dangerous characters then. We wore torn-up leather jackets, slouched around with toothpicks in our mouths, sniffed glue and ether and what somebody claimed was cocaine. When we wheeled our parents' whining station wagons out into the street we left a patch of rubber half a block long. We drank gin and grape juice, Tango; Thunderbird, and Bali Hai. We were nineteen. We were bad. We read André Gide and struck elaborate poses to show that we didn't give a shit about anything. At night, we went up to Greasy Lake.

Through the center of town, up the strip, past the housing developments and shopping malls, street lights giving way to the thin streaming illumination of the headlights, trees crowding the asphalt in a black unbroken wall: that was the way out to Greasy Lake. The Indians had called it Wakan, a reference to the clarity of its waters. Now it was fetid and murky, the mud banks glittering with broken glass and strewn with beer cans and the charred remains of bonfires. There was a single ravaged island a hundred yards from shore, so stripped of vegetation it looked as if the air force had strafed it. We went up to the lake because everyone went there, because we wanted to snuff the rich scent of possibility on the breeze, watch a girl take off her clothes and plunge into the festering murk, drink beer, smoke pot, howl at the stars, savor the incongruous full-throated roar of rock and roll against the primeval susurus of frogs and crickets. This was nature.

I was there one night, late, in the company of two dangerous characters. Digby wore a gold star in his right ear and allowed his father to pay his tuition at Cornell; Jeff was thinking of quitting school to become a painter/musician/head-shop proprietor. They were both expert in the social graces, quick with a sneer, able to manage a Ford with lousy shocks over a rutted and gutted blacktop road at eighty-five while rolling a joint as compact as a Tootsie Roll Pop stick. They could lounge against a bank of booming speakers and trade

"man" with the best of them or roll out across the dance floor as if their joints worked on bearings. They were slick and quick and they wore their mirror shades at breakfast and dinner, in the shower, in closets and caves. In short, they were bad.

I drove. Digby pounded the dashboard and shouted along with Toots & the Maytals while Jeff hung his head out the window and streaked the side of my mother's Bel Air with vomit. It was early June, the air soft as a hand on your cheek, the third night of summer vacation. The first two nights we'd been out till dawn, looking for something we never found. On this, the third night, we'd cruised the strip sixty-seven times, been in and out of every bar and club we could think of in a twenty-mile radius, stopped twice for bucket chicken and forty-cent hamburgers, debated going to a party at the house of a girl Jeff's sister knew, and chucked two dozen raw eggs at mailboxes and hitchhikers. It was 2:00 A.M.; the bars were closing. There was nothing to do but take a bottle of lemon-flavored gin up to Greasy Lake.

The taillights of a single car winked at us as we swung into the dirt lot with its tufts of weed and washboard corrugations; '57 Chevy, mint, metallic blue. On the far side of the lot, like the exoskeleton of some gaunt chrome insect, a chopper leaned against its kickstand. And that was it for excitement: some junkie half-wit biker and a car freak pumping his girlfriend. Whatever it was we were looking for, we weren't about to find it at Greasy Lake. Not that night.

But then all of a sudden Digby was fighting for the wheel. "Hey, that's Tony Lovett's car! Hey!" he shouted, while I stabbed at the brake pedal and the Bel Air nosed up to the gleaming bumper of the parked Chevy. Digby leaned on the horn, laughing, and instructed me to put my brights on. I flicked on the brights. This was hilarious. A joke. Tony would experience premature withdrawal and expect to be confronted by grim-looking state troopers with flashlights. We hit the horn, strobed the lights, and then jumped out of the car to press our witty faces to Tony's windows; for all we knew we might even catch a glimpse of some little fox's tit, and then we could slap backs with red-faced Tony, roughhouse a little, and go on to new heights of adventure and daring.

The first mistake, the one that opened the whole floodgate, was losing my grip on the keys. In the excitement, leaping from the car with the gin in one hand and a roach clip in the other, I spilled them in the grass—in the dark, rank, mysterious nighttime grass of Greasy Lake. This was a tactical error, as damaging and irreversible in its way as Westmoreland's decision to dig in at Khe Sanh. I felt it like a jab of intuition, and I stopped there by the open door, peering vaguely into the night that puddled up round my feet.

The second mistake—and this was inextricably bound up with the first—was identifying the car as Tony Lovett's. Even before the very bad character in greasy jeans and engineer boots tipped out of the driver's door, I began to realize that this chrome blue was much lighter than the robin's-egg of Tony's car, and that Tony's car didn't have rear-mounted speakers. Judging from their expressions, Digby and Jeff were privately groping toward the same inevitable and unsettling conclusion as I was.

In any case, there was no reasoning with this bad greasy character—clearly he

was a man of action. The first lusty Rockette kick of his steel-toed boot caught me under the chin, chipped my favorite tooth, and left me sprawled in the dirt. Like a fool, I'd gone down on one knee to comb the stiff hacked grass for the keys, my mind making connections in the most dragged-out, testudinous way, knowing that things had gone wrong, that I was in a lot of trouble, and that the lost ignition key was my grail and my salvation. The three or four succeeding blows were mainly absorbed by my right buttock and the tough piece of bone at the base of my spine.

Meanwhile, Digby vaulted the kissing bumpers and delivered a savage kung-fu blow to the greasy character's collarbone. Digby had just finished a course in martial arts for phys-ed credit and had spent the better part of the past two nights telling us apocryphal tales of Bruce Lee types and of the raw power invested in lightning blows shot from coiled wrists, ankles, and elbows. The greasy character was unimpressed. He merely backed off a step, his face like a Toltec mask, and laid Digby out with a single whistling roundhouse blow . . . but by now Jeff had got into the act, and I was beginning to extricate myself from the dirt, a tinny compound of shock, rage, and impotence wadded in my throat.

Jeff was on the guy's back, biting at his ear. Digby was on the ground, cursing. I went for the tire iron I kept under the driver's seat. I kept it there because bad characters always keep tire irons under the driver's seat, for just such an occasion as this. Never mind that I hadn't been involved in a fight since sixth grade, when a kid with a sleepy eye and two streams of mucus depending from his nostrils hit me in the knee with a Louisville slugger; never mind that I'd touched the tire iron exactly twice before, to change tires: it was there. And I went for it.

I was terrified. Blood was beating in my ears, my hands were shaking, my heart turning over like a dirtbike in the wrong gear. My antagonist was shirtless, and a single cord of muscle flashed across his chest as he bent forward to peel Jeff from his back like a wet overcoat. "Motherfucker," he spat, over and over, and I was aware in that instant that all four of us—Digby, Jeff, and myself included—were chanting "motherfucker, motherfucker," as if it were a battle cry. (What happened next? the detective asks the murderer from beneath the turned-down brim of his porkpie hat. I don't know, the murderer says, something came over me. Exactly.)

Digby poked the flat of his hand in the bad character's face and I came at him like a kamikaze, mindless, raging, stung with humiliation—the whole thing, from the initial boot in the chin to this murderous primal instant involving no more than sixty hyperventilating, gland-flooding seconds—I came at him and brought the tire iron down across his ear. The effect was instantaneous, astonishing. He was a stunt man and this was Hollywood, he was a big grimacing toothy balloon and I was a man with a straight pin. He collapsed. Wet his pants. Went loose in his boots.

A single second, big as a zeppelin, floated by. We were standing over him in a circle, gritting our teeth, jerking our necks, our limbs and hands and feet twitching with glandular discharges. No one said anything. We just stared down at the guy, the car freak, the lover, the bad greasy character laid low. Digby looked at me; so did Jeff. I was still holding the tire iron, a tuft of hair clinging to the crook

In one of those nasty little epiphanies for which we are prepared by films and TV and childhood visits to the funeral home to ponder the shrunken painted forms of dead grandparents, I understood what it was that bobbed there so in-admissibly in the dark. Understood, and stumbled back in horror and revulsion, my mind yanked in six different directions (I was nineteen, a mere child, an infant, and here in the space of five minutes I'd struck down one greasy character and blundered into the waterlogged carcass of a second), thinking, The keys, the keys, why did I have to go and lose the keys? I stumbled back, but the muck took hold of my feet—a sneaker snagged, balance lost—and suddenly I was pitching face forward into the buoyant black mass, throwing out my hands in desperation while simultaneously conjuring the image of reeking frogs and muskrats revolting in slicks of their own deliquescing juices. AAAAAArrgh! I shot from the water like a torpedo, the dead man rotating to expose a mossy beard and eyes cold as the moon. I must have shouted out, thrashing around in the weeds, because the voices behind me suddenly became animated.

"What was that?"

"It's them, it's them: they tried to, tried to . . . rape me!" Sobs.

A man's voice, flat Midwestern accent. "You sons a bitches, we'll kill you!" Frogs, crickets.

Then another voice, harsh, r-less, Lower East Side: "Motherfucker!" I recognized the verbal virtuosity of the bad greasy character in the engineer boots. Tooth chipped, sneakers gone, coated in mud and slime and worse, crouching breathless in the weeds waiting to have my ass thoroughly and definitively kicked and fresh from the hideous stinking embrace of a three-days-dead-corpse, I suddenly felt a rush of joy and vindication: the son of a bitch was alive! Just as quickly, my bowels turned to ice. "Come on out of there, you pansy motherfuckers!" the bad greasy character was screaming. He shouted curses till he was out of breath.

The crickets started up again, then the frogs. I held my breath. All at once there was a sound in the weeds, a swishing, a splash: think-a-thunk. They were throwing rocks. The frogs fell silent. I cradled my head. Swish, swish, think-a-thunk. A wedge of feldspar the size of a cue ball glanced off my knee. I bit my finger.

It was then that they turned to the car. I heard a door slam, a curse, and then the sound of the headlights shattering—almost a good-natured sound, celebratory, like corks popping from the necks of bottles. This was succeeded by the dull booming of the fenders, metal on metal, and then the icy crash of the windshield. I inched forward, elbows and knees, my belly pressed to the muck, thinking of guerrillas and commandos and *The Naked and the Dead*. I parted the weeds and squinted the length of the parking lot.

The second car—it was a Trans-Am—was still running, its high beams washing the scene in a lurid stacy light. Tire iron flailing, the greasy bad character was laying into the side of my mother's Bel Air like an avenging demon, his shadow riding up the trunks of the trees. Whomp. Whomp. Whomp-whomp. The other two guys—blond types, in fraternity jackets—were helping out with tree branches and skull-sized boulders. One of them was gathering up bottles, rocks,

like dandelion fluff, like down. Rattled, I dropped it in the dirt, already envisioning the headlines, the pitted faces of the police inquisitors, the gleam of handcuffs, clank of bars, the big black shadows rising from the back of the cell . . . when suddenly a raw torn shriek cut through me like all the juice in all the electric chairs in the country.

It was the fox. She was short, barefoot, dressed in panties and a man's shirt. "Animals!" she screamed, running at us with her fists clenched and wisps of blow-dried hair in her face. There was a silver chain round her ankle, and her toenails flashed in the glare of the headlights. I think it was the toenails that did it. Sure, the gin and the cannabis and even the Kentucky Fried may have had a hand in it, but it was the sight of those flaming toes that set us off—the toad emerging from the loaf in *Virgin Spring*, lipstick smeared on a child: she was already tainted. We were on her like Bergman's deranged brothers—see no evil, hear none, speak none—panting, wheezing, tearing at her clothes, grabbing for flesh. We were bad characters, and we were scared and hot and three steps over the line—anything could have happened.

It didn't.

Before we could pin her to the hood of the car, our eyes masked with lust and greed and the purest primal badness, a pair of headlights swung into the lot. There we were, dirty, bloody, guilty, dissociated from humanity and civilization, the first of the Ur-crimes behind us, the second in progress, shreds of nylon panty and spandex brassiere dangling from our fingers, our flies open, lips licked—there we were, caught in the spotlight. Nailed.

We bolted. First for the car, and then, realizing we had no way of starting it, for the woods. I thought nothing. I thought escape. The headlights came at me like accusing fingers. I was gone.

Rain-bam-bam, across the parking lot, past the chopper and into the feculent undergrowth at the lake's edge, insects flying up in my face, weeds whipping, frogs and snakes and red-eyed turtles splashing off into the night: I was already ankle-deep in muck and tepid water and still going strong. Behind me, the girl's screams rose in intensity, disconsolate, incriminating, the screams of the Sabine women, the Christian martyrs, Anne Frank dragged from the garret. I kept going, pursued by those cries, imagining cops and bloodhounds. The water was up to my knees when I realized what I was doing: I was going to swim for it. Swim the breadth of Greasy Lake and hide myself in the thick clot of woods on the far side. They'd never find me there.

I was breathing in sobs, in gasps. The water lapped at my waist as I looked out over the moon-burnished ripples, the mats of algae that clung to the surface like scabs. Digby and Jeff had vanished. I paused. Listened. The girl was quieter now, screams tapering to sobs, but there were male voices, angry, excited, and the high-pitched ticking of the second car's engine. I waded deeper, stealthily, hunted, the ooze sucking at my sneakers. As I was about to take the plunge—at the very instant I dropped my shoulder for the first slashing stroke—I blundered into something. Something unspeakable, obscene, something soft, wet, moss-grown. A patch of weed? A log? When I reached out to touch it, it gave like a rubber duck, it gave like flesh.

muck, candy wrappers, used condoms, poptops, and other refuse and pitching it through the window on the driver's side. I could see the fox, a white bulb behind the windshield of the '57 Chevy. "Bobbie," she whined over the thumping, "come on." The greasy character paused a moment, took one good swipe at the left taillight, and then heaved the tire iron halfway across the lake. Then he fired up the '57 and was gone.

Blond head nodded at blond head. One said something to the other, too low for me to catch. They were no doubt thinking that in helping to annihilate my mother's car they'd committed a fairly rash act, and thinking too that there were three bad characters connected with that very car watching them from the woods. Perhaps other possibilities occurred to them as well—police, jail cells, justices of the peace, reparations, lawyers, irate parents, fraternal censure. Whatever they were thinking, they suddenly dropped branches, bottles, and rocks and sprang for their car in unison, as if they'd choreographed it. Five seconds. That's all it took. The engine shrieked, the tires squealed, a cloud of dust rose from the rutted lot and then settled back on darkness.

I don't know how long I lay there, the bad breath of decay all around me, my jacket heavy as a bear, the primordial ooze subtly reconstituting itself to accommodate my upper thighs and testicles. My jaws ached, my knee throbbled, my coccyx was on fire. I contemplated suicide, wondered if I'd need bridgework, scraped the recesses of my brain for some sort of excuse to give my parents—a tree had fallen on the car, I was blindsided by a bread truck, hit and run, vandals had got to it while we were playing chess at Digby's. Then I thought of the dead man. He was probably the only person on the planet worse off than I was. I thought about him, fog on the lake, insects chirring eerily, and felt the tug of fear, felt the darkness opening up inside me like a set of jaws. Who was he, I wondered, this victim of time and circumstance bobbing sorrowfully in the lake at my back. The owner of the chopper, no doubt, a bad older character come to this. Shot during a murky drug deal, drowned while drunkenly frolicking in the lake. Another headline. My car was wrecked; he was dead.

When the eastern half of the sky went from black to cobalt and the trees began to separate themselves from the shadows, I pushed myself up from the mud and stepped out into the open. By now the birds had begun to take over for the crickets, and dew lay slick on the leaves. There was a smell in the air, raw and sweet at the same time, the smell of the sun fringing buds and opening blossoms. I contemplated the car. It lay there like a wreck along the highway, like a steel sculpture left over from a vanished civilization. Everything was still. This was nature.

I was circling the car, as dazed and bedraggled as the sole survivor of an air blitz, when Digby and Jeff emerged from the trees behind me. Digby's face was crosshatched with smears of dirt; Jeff's jacket was gone and his shirt was torn across the shoulder. They slouched across the lot, looking sheepish, and silently came up beside me to gape at the ravaged automobile. No one said a word. After a while Jeff swung open the driver's door and began to scoop the broken glass and garbage off the seat. I looked at Digby. He shrugged. "At least they didn't slash the tires," he said.

It was true: the tires were intact. There was no windshield, the headlights were staved in, and the body looked as if it had been sledge-hammered for a quarter a shot at the county fair, but the tires were inflated to regulation pressure. The car was drivable. In silence, all three of us bent to scrape the mud and shattered glass from the interior. I said nothing about the biker. When we were finished, I reached in my pocket for the keys, experienced a nasty stab of recollection, cursed myself, and turned to search the grass. I spotted them almost immediately, no more than five feet from the open door, glinting like jewels in the first tapering shaft of sunlight. There was no reason to get philosophical about it: I eased into the seat and turned the engine over.

It was at that precise moment that the silver Mustang with the flame decals rumbled into the lot. All three of us froze; then Digby and Jeff slid into the car and slammed the door. We watched as the Mustang rocked and bobbed across the ruts and finally jerked to a halt beside the forlorn chopper at the far end of the lot. "Let's go," Digby said. I hesitated, the Bel Air wheezing beneath me.

Two girls emerged from the Mustang. Tight jeans, stiletto heels, hair like frozen fur. They bent over the motorcycle, paced back and forth aimlessly, glanced once or twice at us, and then ambled over to where the reeds sprang up in a green fence round the perimeter of the lake. One of them cupped her hands to her mouth. "Al," she called. "Hey, Al!"

"Come on," Digby hissed. "Let's get out of here."

But it was too late. The second girl was picking her way across the lot, unsteady on her heels, looking up at us and then away. She was older—twenty-five or six—and as she came closer we could see there was something wrong with her: she was stoned or drunk, lurching now and waving her arms for balance. I gripped the steering wheel as if it were the ejection lever of a flaming jet, and Digby spat out my name, twice, terse and impatient.

"Hi," the girl said.

We looked at her like zombies, like war veterans, like deaf-and-dumb pencil peddlers.

She smiled, her lips cracked and dry. "Listen," she said, bending from the waist to look in the window, "you guys seen Al?" Her pupils were pinpoints, her eyes glass. She jerked her neck. "That's his bike over there—Al's. You seen him?"

Al. I didn't know what to say. I wanted to get out of the car and retch. I wanted to go home to my parents' house and crawl into bed. Digby poked me in the ribs. "We haven't seen anybody," I said.

The girl seemed to consider this, reaching out a slim veiny arm to brace herself against the car. "No matter," she said, slurring the t's, "he'll turn up." And then, as if she'd just taken stock of the whole scene—the ravaged car and our battered faces, the desolation of the place—she said: "Hey, you guys look like some pretty bad characters—been fightin', huh?" We stared straight ahead, rigid as catatonics. She was fumbling in her pocket and muttering something. Finally she held out a handful of tablets in glassine wrappers: "Hey, you want to party, you want to do some of these with me and Sarah?"

I just looked at her. I thought I was going to cry. Digby broke the silence. "No thanks," he said, leaning over me. "Some other time."
I put the car in gear and it inched forward with a groan, shaking off pellets of glass like an old dog shedding water after a bath, heaving over the ruts on its worn springs, creeping toward the highway. There was a sheen of sun on the lake. I looked back. The girl was still standing there, watching us, her shoulders slumped, hand outstretched.