

## The Vastness of the Dark

Boy leaves home



On the twenty-eighth day of June, 1960, which is the planned day of my deliverance, I awake at exactly six A.M. to find myself on my eighteenth birthday, listening to the ringing of the bells from the Catholic church which I now attend only reluctantly on Sundays. "Well," I say to the bells and to myself, "at least tomorrow I will be free of you." And yet I do not move but lie quietly for a while looking up and through the window at the green poplar leaves rustling softly and easily in the Nova Scotian dawn.

The reason that I do not arise immediately on such a momentous day is partially due, at least, to a second sound that is very unlike the regular, majestic booming of the bells. It is the irregular and moistly rattling-rasping sound of my father's snoring which comes from the adjoining room. And although I can only hear him I can see very vividly in my mind how he must be: lying there on his back

with his thinning iron-grey hair tousled upon the pillow and with his hollow cheeks and even his jet-black eyebrows rising and falling slightly with the erratic pattern of his breathing. His mouth is slightly open and there are little bubbles of saliva forming and breaking at its corners, and his left arm and perhaps even his left leg are hanging over the bed's edge and resting upon the floor. It seems, with his arm and leg like that, as if he were prepared within his sleeping consciousness for any kind of unexpected emergency that might arise; so that if and when it does he will only have to roll slightly to his left and straighten and be immediately standing. Half of his body already touches the floor in readiness.

In our home no one gets up before he does; but in a little while, I think, that too will happen. He will sort of gasp in a strangled way and the snoring will cease. Then there will be a few stealthy movements and the ill-fitting door will open and close and he will come walking through my room carrying his shoes in his left hand while at the same time trying to support his trousers and also to button and buckle them with his right. As long as I can remember he has finished dressing while walking but he does not handle buttons nor buckles so well since the dynamite stick at the little mine where he used to work ripped the first two fingers from his scarred right hand. Now the remaining fingers try to do what is expected of them: to hold, to button, to buckle, to adjust, but they do so with what seems a sort of groping uncertainty bordering on despair. As if they realized that there is now just too much for them to do even though they try as best they can.

When he comes through this room he will be walking softly so as not to awaken me and I will close my eyes and do my imitation of sleep so that he will think himself successful. After he has gone downstairs to start the fire there will be a pause and perhaps a few exploratory coughs

exchanged between my mother and me in an unworded attempt to decide who is going to make the next move. If I cough it will indicate that I am awake and usually that means I will get up next and follow the route of my father downstairs. If, on the other hand, I make no sound, in a few minutes my mother also will come walking through my room. As she passes I will close my eyes a second time but I have always the feeling that it does not work for her; that unlike my father she can tell the difference between sleep which is real and that which is feigned. And I feel always dishonest about my deception. But today, I think, it will be the last time, and I want both of them down the stairs before I myself descend. For today I have private things to do which can only be done in the brief interval between the descent of my parents and the rising of my seven younger brothers and sisters.

Those brothers and sisters are now sleeping in a very different world across the hallway in two large rooms called generally "the girls' room" and "the boys' room." In the former there are my sisters and their names and ages are: Mary, 15, Judy, 14, Catherine, 12, and Bernadette, 3. In the other there are Daniel, 9, Harvey, 7, and David, 5. They live there, across the hall, in an alien but sociable world of half-suppressed giggles, impromptu pantomimes and muffled-silent pillow fights and fall to sleep in beds filled with oft-exchanged comic books and the crumbs of smuggled cookies. On "our" side of the hall it is very different. There is only one door for the two rooms and my parents, as I have said, have always to walk through my room to get to theirs. It is not a very good arrangement and at one time my father intended to cut another door from the hallway into their room and to close off the inadequate connecting door between their room and mine. But at one time he also probably planned to seal and cover the wooden beams and ribs that support the roof in all our rooms and he has not

done that either. On the very coldest winter mornings you can look up and see the frost on the icy heads of the silver nails and see your breath in the coldly crystal air.

Sleeping over here on this side of the hall I have always felt very adult and separated from my younger brothers and sisters and their muffled worlds of laughter. I suppose it has something to do with the fact that I am the oldest by three years and circumstances have made me more alone. At one time each of us has slept in a crib in my parents' room and as I was the first I was not moved very far - only into the next room. Perhaps they kept me close because they were more nervous about me, and for a longer time, as they had not had much experience at that time with babies or younger children. So I have been here in this bed all by myself for as long as I can remember. The next three in our family are girls and I am separated from Daniel, the nearest boy, by an unbridgeable abyss of nine years. And by that time it seems my parents felt there was no point in either moving him in with me or me across the hall with him, as if they had somehow gotten used to hearing me breathing in the room so close to theirs and knew that I knew a great deal about them and about their habits and had been kind of backed into trusting me as if I were, perhaps, a younger brother or perhaps more intimately a friend. It is a strange and lonely thing to lie awake at night and listen to your parents making love in the next room and to be able even to count the strokes. And to know that they really do not know how much you know, but to know that they do know that you know; and not to know when the knowledge of your knowing came to them any more than they know when it came to you. And during these last four or five years lying here while the waves of embarrassed horniness roll over me, I have developed, apart from the problems of my own tumescent flesh, a sort of sympathy for the problem that must be theirs and for the awful violation

of privacy that all of us represent. For it must be a very difficult thing for two people to try to have a sex life together when they know that the first product of that life is lying listening to them only a few feet away. Also, I know something else that I do not think they know I know.

I was told it by my paternal grandfather seven years ago when I was ten and he was eighty, on a spring day when, warmed by the sun, he had gone downtown and sat in a tavern most of the afternoon, drinking beer and spitting on the floor and slapping the table and his knee with the palm of his hand, his head wreathed in the pipe smoke of the mine-mutilated old men who were his friends. And as I passed the tavern's open door with my bag of papers he had hailed me as if I were some miniature taxi-cab and had said that he wished to go home. And so we had wended our way through the side streets and the back alleys, a small slightly embarrassed boy and a staggering but surprisingly erect old man who wanted me beside him but not to physically support him as that would hurt his pride.

"I am perfectly capable of walking home by myself, James," he said, looking down at me off the tip of his nose and over his walrus moustache, "no one is taking me home, I only want company. So you stay over on your side and I will stay on mine and we will just be friends going for a walk as indeed we are."

But then we had turned into an alley where he had placed his left arm against a building's brick wall and leaned, half-resting, his forehead against it while his right hand fumbled at his fly. And standing there with his head against the wall and with his shoes two feet from its base he had seemed like some strange, speaking hypotenuse from the geometry books at school and standing in the steam of his urine he had mumbled into the wall that he loved me, although he didn't often say so, and that he had loved me even before I was born.

*Grandmother*  
"You know," he said, "when I learned that your mother was knocked up I was so happy I was just ashamed. And my wife was in a rage and your mother's parents were weeping and wringing their silly hands and whenever I was near them I would walk around looking at my shoes. But I think that, God forgive me, I may have even prayed for something like that and when I heard it I said, 'Well he will have to stay now and marry her because that's the kind of man he is, and he will work in my place now just as I've always wanted.'"

Then his forehead seemed to slide off his resting arm and he lurched unsteadily, almost bumping into me and seeming to see me for the first time. "Oh God," he said with a startled, frightened expression, "what a selfish old fool! What have I done now? Forget everything I said!" And he had squeezed my shoulder too tightly at first but then relaxed his grip and let his gigantic hand lie there limply all the way to his home. As soon as he entered his door, he flopped into the nearest chair and said almost on the verge of tears, "I think I told him. I think I told him." And my grandmother who was ten years younger turned on him in alarm but only asked, "What?" and he, raising both hands off his lap and letting them fall back in a sort of helpless gesture of despair said, "Oh you know, you know," as if he were very much afraid.

"Go on home James," she said to me evenly and kindly although I knew she was very angry, "and pay no attention to this old fool. He has never in all his life known when to open and close his pants or his mouth." As I turned to leave, I noticed for the first time that he had not redone his trousers after urinating in the alley and that his underwear was awry.

*Underwear*  
No one has ever mentioned it since but because one of my grandparents was so frightened and the other so angry I know that it is true because they do not react that

strongly to anything that is not real. And knowing so I have never checked it further. And it is strange too with this added knowledge to lie in bed at night and to hear the actual beginnings of your brothers and sisters, to almost share in it in an odd way and to know that you did not begin really in that same way or at least not in that bed. And I have imagined the back seats of the old cars I've seen in pictures, or the grassy hills behind the now torn-down dance halls or the beaches of sand beside the sea. I like to think somehow that it had been different for them at my conception and that there had been joy instead of grim release. But I suppose we, all of us, like to think of ourselves as children of love rather than of necessity. That we have come about because there was a feeling of peace and well-being before the erection rather than its being the other way around. But of course I may be as wrong about that as I am about many things and perhaps I do not know what they feel now anymore than what they might have felt then.

But after today, I will probably not have to think about it anymore. For today I leave behind this grimy Cape Breton coal-mining town whose prisoner I have been for all of my life. And I have decided that almost any place must be better than this one with its worn-out mines and smoke-black houses; and the feeling has been building within me for the last few years. It seems to have come almost with the first waves of sexual desire and with it to have grown stronger and stronger with the passing months and years. For I must not become as my father whom I now hear banging the stove-lids below me as if there were some desperate rush about it all and some place that he must be in a very short time. Only to go nowhere. And I must not be as my grandfather who is now an almost senile old man, nearing ninety, who sits by the window all day saying his prayers and who in his moments of clarity remembers mostly his conquests over coal, and recounts tales of how

straight were the timbers he and my father erected in the now caved-in underground drifts of twenty-five years ago when he was sixty-two and my father twenty-five and I not yet conceived.

It is a long, long time since my grandfather has worked and all the big mines he worked in and which he so romanticizes now are closed. And my father has not worked since early March, and his presence in a house where he does not want to be breeds a tension in us all that is heightened now since school is closed and we are all home and forced in upon ourselves. And as he moves about on this morning, banging stove-lids, pretending it is important that he does so, that he is wanted somewhere soon and therefore must make this noisy rush, I feel myself separated from him by a wide and variegated gulf and very far away from the man, who, shortly after he became my father, would take me for rides upon his shoulders to buy ice-cream at the drugstore, to see the baseball games I did not understand, or into the open fields to pat the pit-horses and be placed upon their broad and gentle backs. As we would approach the horses he would speak softly to them so that they might know where we were and be unafraid when he finally placed his hand upon them, for all of them were blind. They had been so long in the darkness of the mine that their eyes did not know the light, and the darkness of their labour had become that of their lives.

But now my father does not do such things with his younger children even as he no longer works. And he is older and greyer and apart from the missing fingers on his right hand, there is a scar from a broken bit that begins at his hairline and runs like violent lightning down the right side of his face and at night I can hear him coughing and wheezing from the rock dust on his lungs. And perhaps that coughing means that because he has worked in bad mines with bad air these last few years he will not live so

very much longer. And perhaps my brothers and sisters across the hall will never hear him, when they are eighteen, rattling the stove-lids as I do now.

And as I lie here now on my back for the last time, I think of when I lay on my stomach in the underground for the first time with him there beside me in the small bootleg mine which ran beneath the sea and in which he had been working since the previous January. I had joined him at the end of the school year for a few short weeks before the little mine finally closed and I had been rather surprisingly proud to work there and my grandfather in one of his clearer moments said, "Once you start it takes a hold of you, once you drink underground water, you will always come back to drink some more. The water gets in your blood. It is in all of our blood. We have been working in the mines here since 1873."

The little mine paid very low wages and was poorly equipped and ventilated and since it was itself illegal there were no safety regulations. And I had thought, that first day, that I might die as we lay on our stomachs on the broken shale and on the lumps of coal while the water seeped around us and into us and chilled us with unflagging constancy whenever we ceased our mole-like movements. It was a very narrow little seam that we attacked, first with our drilling steels and bits, and then with our dynamite, and finally with our picks and shovels. And there was scarcely thirty-six inches of headroom where we sprawled, my father shovelling over his shoulders like the machine he had almost become while I tried to do what I was told and to be unafraid of the roof coming in or of the rats that brushed my face, or of the water that numbed my legs, my stomach and my testicles or of the fact that at times I could not breathe because the powder-heavy air was so foul and had been breathed before.

And I was aware once of the whistling wind of

movement beside me and over me and saw by the light of my lamp the gigantic pipe-wrench of my father describing an arc over me and landing with a squealing crunch an arm's length before me; and then I saw the rat, lying on its back and inches from my eyes. Its head was splattered on the coal and on the wrench and it was still squeaking while a dying stream of yellow urine trickled down between its convulsively jerking legs. And then my father released the wrench and seizing the not quite dead rat by the tail hurled it savagely back over his shoulder so that the thud of its body could be heard behind us as it bounced off the wall and then splashed into the water. "You dirty son of a bitch," he said between clenched teeth and wiped the back of the wrench against the rocky wall. And we lay there then for a while without moving, chilled together in the dampness and the dark.

And now, strangely enough, I do not know if that is what I hate and so must leave, or if it is the fact that now there is not even that mine, awful as it was, to go to, and perhaps it is better to have a place to go to that you hate than to have no place at all. And it is the latter which makes my father now increasingly tense and nervous because he has always used his body as if it were a car with its accelerator always to the floor and now as it becomes more scarred and wasted, he can only use it for sex or taut too-rapid walks along the seashore or back into the hills; and when everything else fails he will try to numb himself with rum and his friends will bring him home in the evenings and dump him with his legs buckling beneath him, inside his kitchen door. And my mother and I will half carry and half drag him through the dining room to the base of the stairs and up the fourteen steps, counting them to ourselves, one by one. We do not always get that far; once he drove his left fist through the glass of the dining room window and I wrestled with him back and forth across the

floor while the wildly swinging and still-clenched fist flashed and flecked its scarlet blood upon the floor and the wallpaper and the curtains and the dishes and the foolish sad dolls and colouring books and *Great Expectations* which lay upon the table. And when he was subdued and the fist became a hand we had to ask him politely to clench it again so that the wounds would reopen while the screaming iodine was poured over and into them and the tweezers probed for the flashing slivers of glass. And we had prayed then, he included, that no tendons were damaged and that no infection would set in because it was the only good hand that he had and all of us rode upon it as perilous passengers on an unpredictably violent sea.

Sometimes when he drinks so heavily my mother and I cannot always get him to his bed and leave him instead on mine, trying to undress him as best we can, amidst his flailing arms and legs and shouted obscenities, hoping at least to get his shoes, and loosen his collar and belt and trousers. And during the nights that follow such days I lie rigid beside him, trying to overcome the nausea caused by the sticky, sweet stench of the rum and listening to the sleep-talker's mumbled, incoherent words, his uneven snoring, and the frightening catches in his breathing caused by the phlegm within his throat. Sometimes he will swing out unexpectedly with either hand and once his forearm landed across my nose with such force that the blood and tears welled to the surface simultaneously and I had to stuff the bedclothes into my mouth to stifle the cry that rose upon my lips.

But yet it seems that all storms subside first into gusts and then into calm and perhaps without storms and gusts we might never have any calm, or perhaps having it we would not recognize it for what it is; and so when he awakens at one or two A.M. and lies there quietly in the dark it is the most peaceful of all times, like the quiet of the

sea, and it is only then that I catch glimpses of the man who took me for the rides upon his shoulders. And I arise and go down the stairs as silently as I can, through the sleeping house, and fetch the milk which soothes the thickness of his tongue and the parched and fevered dryness of his throat and he says "Thank you," and that he is sorry, and I say that it is all right and that there is really nothing to be sorry for. And he says that he is sorry that he has acted the way he has and that he is sorry he has been able to give me so little but if he cannot give he will try very hard not to take. And that I am free and owe my parents nothing. That in itself is perhaps quite a lot to give, for many people like myself go to work very young here or did when there was work to go to and not everyone gets into high school or out of it. And perhaps even the completion of high school is the gift that he has given me along with that of life.

But that is also now ended, I think, the life here and the high school and the thought jolts me into the realization that I have somehow been half-dozing, for although I think I clearly remember everything, my mother has obviously already passed through this room for now I hear her moving about downstairs preparing breakfast. I am rather grateful that at least I have not had to pretend to be asleep on this the last of all these days.

Moving now as quickly as I can, I remove from beneath the mattress the battered old packsack that was my father's in earlier, younger days. "Would it be all right if I use that old packsack sometime?" I had asked as casually as possible some months before, trying to make my plans for it sound like some weary camping expedition. "Sure," he had said in an even non-committal fashion.

Now I pack it quietly, checking with my ball-point pen the items that I have listed on the back of the envelope kept beneath my pillow. Four pairs of underwear, five pairs of socks, two pairs of pants, four shirts, one towel, some

handkerchiefs, a gabardine jacket, a plastic raincoat and a shaving set. The latter is the only item that is new and unused and is the cheapest that Gillette manufactures. Up until this time I have always used my father's razor which is battered and verdigris green from years of use. I have used it for some years now - more often, at times, than my questionable beard demanded.

As I move down the stairs there is still no movement from the two larger rooms across the hall and for this I am most grateful. I do not really know how to say good-bye as I have never before said it to anyone and because I am uncertain I wish to say it now to as few as possible. Who knows, though, perhaps I may even be rather good at it. I lay the packsack down on the second stair from the bottom where it is not awfully visible and walk into the kitchen. My mother is busy at her stove and my father is standing with his back to the room looking through the window over a view of slate-grey slag heaps and ruined skeletal mine tips and out toward the rolling sea. They are not greatly surprised to see me as it is often like this, just the three of us in the quiet early morning. But today I cannot afford to be casual and I must say what must be said in the short space of time occupied by only the three of us. "I think I'll go away today," I say, trying to sound as offhand as possible. Only a slight change in the rhythm of my mother's poking at the stove indicates that she has heard me, and my father still stands looking through the window out to sea. "I think I'll go right now," I add, my voice sort of trailing off, "before the others get up it will be easier that way."

My mother moves the kettle, which has started to boil, toward the back of the stove, as if stalling for time, then she turns and says, "Where will you go? To Blind River?"

Her response is so little like that which I anticipated that I feel strangely numb. For I had somehow expected her

to be greatly surprised, astounded, astonished, and she is none of these. And her mention of Blind River, the centre of Northern Ontario's uranium mines, is something and someplace that I had never even thought of. It is as if my mother had not only known that I was to leave but had even planned my route and final destination. I am reminded of my reading in school of the way Charles Dickens felt about the blacking factory and his mother's being so fully in favour of it. In favour of a life for him which he considered so terrible and so far beneath his imagined destiny.

My father turns from the window and says, "You are only eighteen today, perhaps you could wait awhile. Something might turn up." But within his eyes I see no strong commitment to his words and I know he feels that waiting is at best weary and at worst hopeless. This also makes me somehow rather disappointed and angry as I had thought somehow my parents would cling to me in a kind of desperate fashion and I would have to be very firm and strong.

"What is there to wait for?" I say, asking a question that is useless and to which I know the all too obvious answer. "Why do you want me to stay here?"

"You misunderstand," says my father, "you are free to go if you want to. We are not forcing you or asking you to do anything. I am only saying that you do not *have* to go now."

But suddenly it becomes very important that I *do* go now, because it seems things cannot help but get worse. So I say, "Good-bye. I will write but it will not be from Blind River." I add the last as an almost unconscious little gibe at my mother.

I go and retrieve my pack and then pass back through the house, out the door and even through the little gate. My parents follow me to the gate. My mother says, "I was planning a cake for today . . ." and then stops uncertainly, her sentence left hanging in the early morning air. She is trying to make amends for her earlier statement and

rather desperately gropes her way back to the fact of my birthday. My father says, "Perhaps you should go over home. They may not be there if and when you come again."

It is but a half block to "over home," the house of my father's parents, who have always been there as long as I can remember and who have always provided a sort of haven for all of us through all our little storms and my father's statement that they will not be there forever is an intimation of something that I have never really considered before. So now I move with a sort of apprehension over the ashes and cinder-filled pot-holes of the tired street toward the old house blackened with the coal dust of generations. It is as yet hardly seven A.M. and it is as if I am some early morning milkman moving from one house to another to leave good-byes instead of bottles beside such quiet doors.

Inside my grandparents' house, my grandfather sits puffing his pipe by the window, while passing the beads of his rosary through fingers which are gnarled and have been broken more times than he can remember. He has been going deaf for some time and he does not turn his head when the door closes behind me. I decide that I will not start with him because it will mean shouting and repetition and I am not sure I will be able to handle that. My grandmother, like my mother, is busy at her stove. She is tall and white-haired and although approaching eighty she is still physically imposing. She has powerful, almost masculine hands and has always been a big-boned person without ever having been heavy or ever having any difficulty with her legs. She still moves swiftly and easily and her eyesight and hearing are perfect.

"I am going away today," I say as simply as I can.

She pokes with renewed energy at her stove and then answers: "It is just as well. There is nothing for one to do here anyway. There was never anything for one to do here."

She has always spoken with the Gaelic inflection of

her youth and in that detached third-person form which I had long ago suggested that she modernize.

"Come here James," she says and takes me into her pantry, where with surprising agility she climbs up on a chair and takes from the cupboard's top shelf a huge cracked and ancient sugar bowl. Within it there are dusty picture postcards, some faded yellow payslips which seem ready to disintegrate at the touch, and two yellowed letters tied together with a shoelace. The locations on the payslips and on the postcards leap at me across a gulf of dust and years: Springhill, Scranton, Wilkes-Barre, Yellowknife, Britannia Beach, Butte, Virginia City, Escanaba, Sudbury, Whitehorse, Drumheller, Harlan, Ky., Elkins, W.Va., Ferrie, B.C., Trinidad, Colo. - coal and gold, copper and lead, gold and iron, nickel and gold and coal. East and West and North and South. Mementoes and messages from places that I so young and my grandmother so old have never seen.

"Your father was under the ground in all those places," she says half-angrily, "the same way he was under the ground here before he left and under it after he came back. It seems we will be underground long enough when we are dead without seeking it out while we are still alive."

"But still," she says after a quiet pause and in a sober tone, "it was what he was good at and wanted to do. It was just not what I wanted him to do, or at least I did not want him to do it here."

She unties the shoelace and shows me the two letters. The first is dated March 12, 1938, and addressed General Delivery, Kellogg, Idaho: "I am getting old now and I would like very much if you would come back and take my working place at the mine. The seam is good for years yet. No one has been killed for some time now. It is getting better. The weather is mild and we are all fine. Don't bother

writing. Just come. We will be waiting for you. Your fond father."

The second bears the same date and is also addressed General Delivery, Kellogg, Idaho: "Don't listen to him. If you return here you will never get out and this is no place to lead one's life. They say the seam will be finished in another few years. Love, Mother."

I have never seen my grandfather's handwriting before and for some reason, although I knew he read, I had always thought him unable to write. Perhaps, I think now, it is because his hands have been so broken and misshapen; and with increasing age, hard to control for such a fine task as writing.

The letters are written with the same broad-nibbed pen in an ink which is of a blackness that I have never seen and somehow these letters now seem like a strangely old and incompatible married couple, each cancelling out the other's desires while bound together by a single worn and dusty lace.

I go out of the pantry and to the window where my grandfather sits. "I am going away today!" I shout, leaning over him.

"Oh yes," he says in a neutral tone of voice, while continuing to look out the window and finger his rosary. He does not move and the pipe smoke curls upward from his pipe which is clenched between his worn and strongly stained teeth. Lately he has taken to saying, "Oh yes," to almost everything as a means of concealing his deafness and now I do not know if he has really heard me or is merely giving what seems a standard and safe response to all of the things he hears but partially if at all. I do not feel that I can say it again without my voice breaking and so I turn away. At the door I find that he has shuffled behind me.

"Don't forget to come back James," he says, "it's the

only way you'll be content. Once you drink underground water it becomes a part of you like the blood a man puts into a woman. It changes her forever and never goes away. There's always a part of him running there deep inside her. It's what will wake you up at night and never ever leave you alone."

Because he knows how much my grandmother is opposed to what he says he has tried to whisper to me. But he is so deaf that he can hardly hear his own voice and he has almost shouted in the way deaf people do; his voice seems to echo and bounce off the walls of his house and to escape out into the sunshot morning air. I offer him my hand to shake and find it almost crushed in the crooked broken force of his. I can feel the awful power of his oddly misshapen fingers, his splayed and flattened too broad thumb, the ridges of the toughened, blackened scars and the abnormally large knobs that are his twisted misplaced knuckles. And I have a feeling for a terrible moment that I may never ever get away or be again released. But he finally relaxes and I feel that I am free.

Even pot-holed streets are lonely ones when you think you may not see them again for a very long time or perhaps forever. And I travel now mostly the back streets because I am conspicuous with my pack sack and I do not want any more conversations or attempted and failed and futile explanations. At the outskirts of the town a coal truck stops for me and we travel for twenty-five miles along the shoreline of the sea. The truck makes so much noise and rides so roughly that conversation with the driver is impossible and I am very grateful for the noisy silence in which we are encased.

By noon after a succession of short rides in a series of oddly assorted vehicles I am finally across the Strait of Canso, off Cape Breton Island and at last upon my way. It is only when I have left the Island that I can feel free to

assume my new identity which I don like carefully preserved new clothes taken from within their pristine wrappings. It assumes that I am from Vancouver which is as far away as I can imagine.

I have been somehow apprehensive about even getting off Cape Breton Island, as if at the last moment it might extend gigantic tentacles, or huge monstrous hands like my grandfather's to seize and hold me back. Now as I finally set foot on the mainland I look across at the heightened mount that is Cape Breton now, rising mistily out of the greenness and the white-capped blueness of the sea.

My first ride on the mainland is offered by three Negroes in a battered blue Dodge pickup truck that bears the information "Rayfield Clyde, Lincolnville, N.S., Light Trucking" on its side. They say they are going the approximately eighty miles to New Glasgow and will take me if I wish. They will not go very fast, they say, because their truck is old and I might get a better ride if I choose to wait. On the other hand, the driver says, I will at least be moving and I will get there sooner or later. Anytime I am sick of it and want to stop I can bang on the roof of the cab. They would take me in the cab but it is illegal to have four men in the cab of a commercial vehicle and they do not want any trouble with the police. I climb into the back and sit on the worn spare tire and the truck moves on. By now the sun is fairly high and when I remove the pack sack from my shoulders I can feel although I cannot see the two broad bands of perspiration traced and crossing upon my back. I realize now that I am very hungry and have eaten nothing since last evening's supper.

In New Glasgow I am let off at a small gas station and my Negro benefactors point out the shortest route to the western outskirts of the town. It leads through cluttered back streets where the scent of the greasy hamburgers reeks out of the doors of the little lunch-counters with their over-

loud juke-boxes; simultaneously pushing Elvis Presley and the rancid odours of the badly cooked food through the half open doors. I would like to stop but somehow there is a desperate sense of urgency now as if each of the cars on the one-way street is bound for a magical destination and I feel that should I stop for even a moment's hamburger I might miss the one ride that is worthwhile. The sweat is running down my forehead now and stings my eyes and I know the two dark patches of perspiration upon my back and beneath the straps are very wide.

The sun seems at its highest when the heavy red car pulls over to the highway's gravelled shoulder and its driver leans over to unlock the door on the passenger side. He is a very heavy man of about fifty with a red perspiring face and a brown cowlick of hair plastered down upon his damply glistening forehead. His coat is thrown across the back of the seat and his shirt pocket contains one of those plastic shields bristling with pens and pencils. The collar of the shirt is open and his tie is loosened and awry; his belt is also undone, as is the button at the waistband of his trousers. His pants are grey and although stretched tautly over his enormous thighs they still appear as damply wrinkled. Through his white shirt the sweat is showing darkly under his armpits and also in large blotches on his back which are visible when he leans forward. His hands seem very white and disproportionately small.

As we move off down the shimmering highway with its mesmerizing white line, he takes a soiled handkerchief that has been lying on the seat beside him and wipes the wet palms of his hands and also the glistening wet blackness of the steering wheel.

"Boy, it sure is hot," he says, "hotter'n a whore in hell."

"Yes," I say, "it sure is. It really is."

"Dirty little town back there," he says, "you can spend a week there just driving through."

"Yes, it isn't much."

"Just travelling through?"

"Yes, I'm going back to Vancouver."

"You got a whole lot of road ahead of you boy, a whole lot of road. I never been to Vancouver, never west of Toronto. Been trying to get my company to send me west for a long while now but they always send me down here. Three or four times a year. Weather's always miserable. Hotter'n hell like this here or in the winter cold enough to freeze the balls off a brass monkey." He beats out a salvo of homblasts at a teenage girl who is standing uncertainly by the roadside.

Although the windows of the car are open, it is very hot and the redness of the car seems to intensify the feeling and sense of heat. All afternoon the road curves and winds ahead of us like a bucking, shimmering snake with a dirty white streak running down its back. We seem to ride its dips and bends like captive passengers on a roller-coaster, leaning our bodies into the curves, and bracing our feet against the tension of the floorboards. My stomach vanishes as we hurtle into the sudden unexpected troughs and returns as quickly as we emerge to continue our twists and turns. Insects ping and splatter against the windshield and are transformed into yellow splotches. The tires hiss on the superheated asphalt and seem almost to leave tracks. I can feel my clothes sticking to me, to my legs and thighs and back. On my companion's shirt the blotches of sweat are larger and more plentiful. Leaning his neck and shoulders back against the seat he lifts his heavy body from the sweat-stained upholstery and thrusts his right hand through his opened trousers and deep into his crotch. "Let a little air in there," he says, as he manoeuvres his genitals, "must be an Indian made this underwear, it keeps creeping up on me."

All afternoon as we travel we talk or rather he talks and I listen which I really do not mind. I have never really

met anyone like him before. The talk is of his business (so much salary, so much commission plus other 'deals' on the side), of his boss (a dumb bastard who is lucky he has good men on the road), of his family (a wife, one son and one daughter, one of each is enough), of sex (he can't get enough of it and will be after it until he dies), of Toronto (it is getting bigger every day and it is not like it used to be), of taxes (they keep getting higher and it doesn't pay a man to keep up his property, also too many Federal giveaways). He goes on and on. I have never listened to anyone like him before. He seems so confident and sure of everything. It is as if he knows that he knows everything and is on top of everything and he seems never to have to hesitate nor stop nor run down nor even to think; as if he were a juke-box fed from some mysterious source by an inexhaustible supply of nickels, dimes and quarters.

The towns and villages and train stations speed by. Fast and hot; Truro, Glenholme and Wentworth and Oxford. We are almost out of Nova Scotia with scarcely thirty miles of it ahead according to my companion. We are almost at the New Brunswick border. I am again in a stage of something like exhausted relief as I approach yet another boundary over which I can escape and leave so much behind. It is the feeling I originally had on leaving Cape Breton only now it has been heaved and dulled by the journey of the day. For it has been long and hot and exhausting.

Suddenly the road veers to the left and no longer hooks and curves but extends up and away from us into a long, long hill, the top of which we can see almost a half mile away. Houses appear on either side as we begin the climb and then there are more and more of them strung out loosely along the road.

My companion blasts out a rhythm of hornblasts at a young girl and her mother who are stretching up on their tiptoes to hang some washing on a clothesline. There is a

basket of newly washed clothes on the ground between them and their hands are busy on the line. They have some clothespins in their teeth so they will not have to bend to reach them and lose their handhold on the line.

"If I had my way, they'd have something better'n that in their mouths," he says, "wouldn't mind resting my balls on the young one's chin for the second round."

He has been looking at them quite closely and the car's tires rattle in the roadside gravel before he pulls it back to the quiet of the pavement.

The houses are closer together now and more blackened and the yards are filled with children and bicycles and dogs. As we move toward what seems to be the main intersection I am aware of the hurrying women in their kerchiefs, and the boys with their bags of papers and baseball gloves and the men sitting or squatting on their heels in tight little compact knots. There are other men who neither sit nor squat but lean against the buildings or rest upon canes or crutches or stand awkwardly on artificial limbs. They are the old and the crippled. The faces of all of them are gaunt and sallow as if they had been allowed to see the sun only recently, when it was already too late for it to do them any good.

"Springhill is a hell of a place," says the man beside me, "unless you want to get laid. It's one of the best there is for that. Lots of mine accidents here and the men killed off. Women used to getting it all the time. Mining towns are always like this. Look at all the kids. This here little province of Nova Scotia leads the country in illegitimacy. They don't give a damn."

The mention of the name Springhill and the realization that this is where I have come is more of a shock than I would ever have imagined. As if in spite of signposts and geography and knowing it was "there," I have never thought of it as ever being "here."

And I remember November 1956: the old cars,

mud-splattered by the land and rusted by the moisture of the sea, parked outside our house with their motors running. Waiting for the all-night journey to Springhill which seemed to me then, in my fourteenth year, so very far away and more a name than even a place. Waiting for the lunches my mother packed in wax paper and in newspaper and the thermos bottles of coffee and tea, and waiting for my father and the same pack-sack which now on this sweating day accompanies me. Only then it was filled with the miners' clothes he would need for the rescue that they hoped they might perform. The permanently blackened underwear, the heavy woollen socks, the boots with the steel-reinforced toes, the blackened, sweat-stained miner's belt which sagged on the side that carried his lamp, the crescent wrench, the dried and dustied water-bag, trousers and gloves and the hard hat chipped and dented and broken by the years of falling rock.

And all of that night my grandfather with his best ear held to the tiny radio for news of the buried men and of their rescuers. And at school the teachers taking up collections in all of the class-rooms and writing in large letters on the blackboard, "Springhill Miners' Relief Fund, Springhill, N.S." which was where we were sending the money, and I remember also my sisters' reluctance at giving up their hoarded nickels, dimes and quarters because noble causes and death do not mean very much when you are eleven, ten and eight and it is difficult to comprehend how children you have never known may never see their fathers any more, not walking through the door nor perhaps even being carried through the door in the heavy coffins for the last and final look. Other people's buried fathers are very strange and far away but licorice and movie matinees are very close and real.

"Yeah," says the voice beside me, "I was in here six months ago and got this little, round woman. Really giving it to her, pumping away and all of a sudden she starts kind

of crying and calling me by this guy's name I never heard of. Must have been her dead husband or something. Kind of scared the hell out of me. Felt like a goddamn ghost or something. Almost lost my rod. Might have too but I was almost ready to shoot it into her."

We are downtown now and it is late afternoon in the period before the coming of the evening. The sun is no longer as fierce as it was earlier and it slants off the blackened buildings, many of which are shells bleak and fire-gutted and austere. A Negro woman with two light-skinned little boys crosses the street before us. She is carrying a bag of groceries and the little boys have each an opened sixteen-ounce bottle of Pepsi-Cola. They put their hands over the bottles' mouths and shake them vigorously to make the contents fizz.

"Lots of people around here marry niggers," says the voice. "Guess they're so black underground they can't tell the difference in the light. All the same in the dark as the fellow says." Had an explosion here a few years ago and some guys tapped down there, I dunno how long. Eaten the lunches of the dead guys and the bark off the timbers and drinking one another's piss. Some guy in Georgia offered the ones they got out a trip down there but there was a nigger in the bunch so he said he couldn't take him. Then the rest wouldn't go. Damned if I'd lose a trip to Georgia because of a single nigger that worked for the same company. Like I say, I'm old enough to be your father or even your grandfather and I haven't even been to Vancouver."

It is 1958 that he is talking about now and it is much clearer in my mind than 1956 which is perhaps the difference between being fourteen and sixteen when something happens in your life. A series of facts or near facts that I did not even realize I possessed flash now in succession upon my mind: the explosion in 1958 occurred on a Thursday as did the one in 1956, Cumberland No. 2 at the time of the explosion was the deepest coal mine in North America; in



rolled from off my tongue; or with the crossing of bodies of water or with the boundaries of borders. And because my father had told me I was "free" I had foolishly felt that it was really so. Just like that. And I realize now that the older people of my past are more complicated than perhaps I had ever thought. And that there are distinctions between my sentimental, romantic grandfather and his love for coal, and my stern and practical grandmother and her hatred of it; and my quietly strong but passive mother and the soaring extremes of my father's passionate violence and the quiet power of his love. They are all so different. But yet they have somehow endured and given me the only life I know for all these eighteen years. Their lives flowing into mine and mine from out of theirs. Different but somehow more similar than I had ever thought. Perhaps it is possible I think now to be both and yet to see only the one. For the man in whose glassed-in car I now sit sees only similarity. For him the people of this multi-scarred little town are reduced to but a few phrases and the act of sexual intercourse. They are only so many identical goldfish leading identical, incomprehensible lives within the glass prison of their bowl. And the people on the street view me behind my own glass in much the same way and it is the way that I have looked at others in their "foreign licence" cars and it is the kind of judgement that I myself have made. And yet it seems that neither these people nor this man are in any way unkind and not to understand does not necessarily mean that one is cruel. But one should at least be honest. And perhaps I have tried too hard to be someone else without realizing at first what I presently am. I do not know. I am not sure. But I do know that I cannot follow this man into a house that is so much like the one I have left this morning and go down into the sexual embrace of a woman who might well be my mother. And I do not know what she, my mother, may be like in the years to come when she is de-

prived of the lightning movement of my father's body and the hammered pounding of his heart. For I do not know when he may die. And I do not know in what darkness she may then cry out his name nor to whom. I do not know very much of anything, it seems, except that I have been wrong and dishonest with others and myself. And perhaps this man has left footprints on a soul I did not even know that I possessed.

It is dark now on the outskirts of Springhill when the car's headlights pick me up in their advancing beams. It pulls over to the side and I get into its back seat. I have trouble closing the door behind me because there is no handle so I pull on the crank that is used for the window. I am afraid that even it may come off in my hand. There are two men in the front seat and I can see only the outlines of the backs of their heads and I cannot tell very much about them. The man in the back seat beside me is not awfully visible either. He is tall and lean but from what I see of his face it is difficult to tell whether he is thirty or fifty. There are two sacks of miner's gear on the floor at his feet and I put my sack there too because there isn't any other place.

"Where are you from?" he asks as the car moves forward. "From Cape Breton," I say and tell him the name of my home.

"We are too," he says, "but we're from the Island's other side. I guess the mines are pretty well finished where you're from. They're the old ones. They're playing out where we're from too. Where are you going now?"

"I don't know," I say, "I don't know."

"We're going to Blind River," he says. "If it doesn't work there we hear they've found uranium in Colorado and are getting ready to start sinking shafts. We might try that, but this is an old car and we don't think it'll make it to Colorado. You're welcome to come along with us though if you want. We'll carry you for a while."

"I don't know," I say. "I don't know. I'll have to think about it. I'll have to make up my mind."

The car moves forward into the night. Its headlights seek out and follow the beckoning white line which seems to lift and draw us forward, upward and inward, forever into the vastness of the dark.

"I guess your people have been on the coal over there for a long time?" asks the voice beside me.

"Yes," I say, "since 1873."

"Son of a bitch," he says, after a pause, "it seems to bust your balls and it's bound to break your heart."

