The Sleeper

1

At 2 a.m. I woke up and drove to the distribution station, a humid concrete bunker behind a rolling metal door just off a street of coffeehouses and boutiques in Northwest Portland which stood dark and empty at that hour. A thin layer of greasy newsprint ink covered every surface inside the station: it varnished the old wooden worktables to a dark sheen, fell in a sticky gauze over the obsolete headlines on the leftover newspapers stacked in the corners, and became waffle-shaped prints left by the deliverers' shoes and boots on the wooden stairs that rose to the loft level, where the manager sat behind a plywood desk with an old black phone. The ink also stained the deliverers' fingers, and showed as dark smudges on their faces where they wiped their foreheads or scratched their chins or cheeks, and it especially streaked the sink beneath the cracked and spattered mirror in the little bathroom where

a roll of paper towels lay on the toilet in place of toilet paper.

2

The manager—wincing, pale, middle-aged, with tightly curled hair that rose into a ragged afro—looked down over the deliverers as they inserted ads, folded and slipped the papers into plastic bags, and stacked the bagged papers in shopping carts. He introduced himself as Carl, and pressed a piece of worn cardstock paper grimed with newsprint into my hand. Smeared fingerprints laced the edges of the card, surrounding the handwritten directions to my route. The delivery addresses were in large block letters, and between the addresses were smaller printed directives that mentioned which streets to turn on and how far to go until the next capital letters. Below us, deliverers pushed their loaded carts out the garage door to dump their papers into their sagging back seats or rusted truck beds, while others returning pushed their carts back into place so they could fill them again.

"You understand this is a seven-day-a-week job?" Carl asked. I said yes, I was fine with it. "I'm strapped tonight," he said. "Think you can try it on your own right off the bat?" I said I didn't see why not.

And so the first night was a disaster of missed addresses, cursing, and driving in circles.

3

Things got better after that, though. With every newspaper I threw those first weeks, I improved my accuracy and efficiency as I drove the deserted industrial streets of my route, slinging papers in a high arc over the roof of the car or flipping them backhand away from the driver's side.

I watched the papers slap against the scratched aluminum garage doors or bent black metal stairs at the backs of warehouses, watched papers skid across empty parking lots to hit curbs near walkways, sometimes tumbling to perfect stops against glass doors on which an all-caps *OFFICE* was stenciled in white. Once, after rocketing a paper up against the garage door of an auto parts warehouse and listening with satisfaction to the sharp report of news against metal, I made a tight turn and nearly ran over a huge deer that lay motionless in the middle of the empty lot. As I drove carefully around it, I saw that there was no head—the neck ended in a meaty stump, from which a thick black stream of blood ran downhill. Misting rain had collected on the deer's fur in pinpoint droplets that shone silver in the night, and I drove away thinking I should call someone to report it. I didn't, though, and when I returned to the warehouse the next night, the body was gone.

4

Two weeks later, at 3:30 in the morning, I saw the boy. It was only for a moment, through a screen door, from a distance. I was moving; he was in shadow. He looked three or four, but he was wearing a one-piece sleeper, the kind that zips from a toddler's ankle to his chin, so he was possibly younger. He stood behind the sagging mesh of the front screen door and looked out—at that time of night, he could only have been looking at his small dark lawn, and beyond the lawn my car, and within that car me, throwing a newspaper toward his house. Beyond my car was only the summer night, humid and pointless: a rusted freight train went about its rumbling business; a million insects hissed their muted roar. Beyond that, there was nothing.

5

A young woman doctor at a local clinic diagnosed my injury. Her high cheekbones, green eyes, and long strawberry-blonde hair were pleasant distractions as I sat shirtless on the paper-covered vinyl table, regretting my pale body. I recognized the woman—she'd treated my daughter Olivia just a year previously, after a bright red rash had blossomed across Olivia's face and her eyelids began to swell shut while my wife Sara and I played with her in the park. Unaware of the grotesque change in her appearance, Olivia had smiled when the doctor ruffled her wispy, translucent hair that day, and giggled as the woman laid fingertips against Olivia's chubby cheeks and smooth forehead. The doctor had proclaimed Olivia cute, told us the rash was a reaction to sunscreen, and prescribed a bath.

When I sat before the same woman a year later, Sara and Olivia were with Sara's parents in Seattle, and the doctor told me it was the first time she'd seen a repetitive motion injury from throwing papers. I received the news with a measure of pride. "You'll want to take a few days off," she said. "The joint needs rest." I explained the seven-day-a-week nature of my job, and she frowned at the wall behind me for a moment, then delivered a short lecture on the mechanics of throwing motions, followed by some demonstrations of stretches to do before and after delivering. "You should treat the job as if it's an athletic event, or things will just get worse," she said, and when she bent to write on her prescription pad, I imagined trailing my fingers down the curve of her lower back, imagined her skin soft and smooth and warm beneath her white medical coat and green blouse. She tore the sheet from her pad and handed it to me. "Talk to the other deliverers," she said. "See what kind of motion they use. If you don't change anything, you'll just be back here in two weeks."

6

I got the prescription filled at a grocery store and took one of the cylindrical blue pills with some water as soon as I got home. Then I walked around the house, awaiting dramatic effects. If I didn't go into my daughter's room and didn't open my wife's closet or any of her drawers in the bedroom, it was almost as if there had never been anyone else there. The dirty dishes in the sink were my dirty dishes. The clothes in the hamper were my clothes. The conceit dissolved in the basement, though, where there were other reminders. The dusty wind-up swing Olivia had fallen asleep in as a newborn lay abandoned in the corner next to her first playmat, with the fabric toys that dangled down: a felt star, a plastic ball, and a plush purple octopus the size of my palm. Occasionally I would catch the toys swaying a bit—a response to some phantom draft, I suppose. Or maybe the toys had their own vague, blunted intentions.

Other things that belonged to my daughter had disappeared: the plastic blocks she liked to scatter across the carpet, for instance, and her empty bottles on the kitchen counter, waiting to be cleaned of their formula slick. I thought about her little fists, the way she clung to my shirt when I picked her up, or how she bounced her palm against my cheek and then waved her arms and gave a surprised peal of laughter when I tossed her in the air. The nights were oddly still without the sound of her crying—that persistent, desperate wail of hunger, fear, or confusion. Sometimes, when I used to go in to pick her up in the night, she would shove her hand in my mouth, and I could

feel her relax as the sharp nails of her chubby little fingers picked their way along the contours of my teeth.

After half an hour of pacing the rooms, I raised my arm experimentally—though the shoulder still ached, the shooting, knife-like pain was gone. The simple fact that the medication had done what it was supposed to do cheered me, and I slept soundly for the first time in weeks.

7

I was already particularly aware of that house, because the people there were always awake. When I reached it each night at 3:30, braked to a slow roll, and prepared to throw their paper, I often saw a male silhouette standing on the warped boards of the small wooden porch, shoulders hunched, moodily sucking a cigarette. When the figure was absent from the porch, he was certainly one of the people I saw through the front screen door, one of three or four men and women who sat on a low couch in a narrow room, their faces lit by an unseen television whose shifting blue light illuminated a haze of cigarette smoke. I didn't have many residential deliveries, and the ones I had were to properly dark, quiet houses. It bothered me not only that the people in that house saw me deliver their paper, but that I found myself unable to avoid looking in as I drove past. I wondered why they weren't asleep. What they did. Why they couldn't at least close the door.

8

I decided the distribution station was like hell: everyone was there for a reason, and most wanted to talk about it. A man in his forties told jokes about prostitutes and animals between explaining the complexities of paying child support for four children among three ex-wives. A doughy

woman who sweated through the same purple sweatsuit every night and smelled of sour milk had three children in private school, though she cheerfully claimed to earn nearly as much delivering newspapers as her husband did selling men's ties. A man with wavy auburn hair and no teeth loaded his papers into a cardboard television box on a dolly tied to the back of his bicycle. As he pedaled off into the mist, the dolly's small black wheels bounced and rattled, and the bicycle's rear tire sent up a rooster tail of spray that glistened orange beneath the streetlights, then disappeared. An aging Deadhead with sunken cheeks, a voice like loose gravel, and spider web tattoos covering his elbows alluded to massive debt from years of substance abuse. His dog barked angrily from the back of his truck at anyone who walked past—its snarls were the last thing I heard before I drove off to handle my own route.

9

I took my painkillers with my coffee as I drove to the station, but the toughest part was when I first arrived and had to assemble two hundred papers before the pills kicked in. Bagging papers was dull, mindless work made even more difficult by the Deadhead's preference for tuning the small radio on his worktable to a station whose playlist seemed to have been culled exclusively from the soft rock soundtrack of my childhood: Cat Stevens continued exhorting people to board the peace train, Streisand and Gibb continued declaring they had nothing to be guilty of, and Joni Mitchell still wanted us to help her, she thought she was falling in love again. The deejay bragged about broadcasting these laments commercial free between midnight and three, and the Deadhead would play with the reception until he got it just right, and then tap his foot

and nod his head while he hummed along. The love songs and the sentimental childhood memories they evoked in me, juxtaposed with the thuds of the stacked papers and grunts of the straining workers, made me feel my life had become the punchline of some arcane conceptual joke. After the Deadhead left to deliver, the remaining employees would talk about how they didn't like his music, but no one ever said anything to him. One night, after listening to Michael McDonald claim he kept forgetting we're not in love anymore, I decided somebody had to make a stand for sanity, and I asked if there was another station we could tune the radio to.

"You don't like this song?" the Deadhead said, incredulous. "That's the Doobie Brothers, man."

"I've heard this song five hundred times."

"It's the only station that comes in good. The others are fuzzed out because of all the metal in here, but I guess I can try—I don't want to annoy anyone." He started messing with the tuning, and for the next minute we heard nothing but static and garbled, distorted voices, until I had to tell him to forget it and just put it back where it was.

"Sorry, man," he said. "I didn't know it was a problem."

"Because you never asked," I said.

"Shit," he said. "You've been here a month? I've been here three years. Just relax."

"How am I supposed to relax when I'm constantly hearing all those shitty songs?"

"So I'll just turn it off."

No one said anything else. In the silence that followed, the sounds of everyone working were distracting and overloud. Even though I'd only said what everyone else was thinking, the silence felt like judgment. They considered

me the bad guy, and I ended up wishing I'd never said anything in the first place.

10

Before she left, my wife claimed that she and I were driving each other crazy trapped in the house together all the time, and that with herself and the baby out of the way for a bit, I could apply all of my energy to my job search. Besides, she said, her parents would love to spend some time with their granddaughter. That I agreed with her when she said these things is not in dispute.

Olivia was starting to string together her first speculative, surreal statements at this time. *Daddy make a red roof house for Livvy*, she informed me on the telephone shortly after they left, and then repeated the phrase multiple times as if it held crucial information. Her sentences seemed crafted of some cryptic, dreamlike symbolism that begged analysis, and I turned the red roof house sentence over in my mind for three days until out of sheer desperation I asked the Deadhead what he thought of it. All he could tell me was that it was pentameter, which I thought would be interesting, until he explained what that meant. I told him I thought maybe Olivia had snatched the red roof house from some song on the radio, but when he started listing old songs with the word "house" in them, I knew we weren't going to solve it. And we didn't.

11

When my refills ran out, I decided to find a place where I could get some more. I chose a walk-in clinic in an old hospital in the rougher part of town, and waited my turn on the hard plastic lobby chair while next to me an old

Asian man sat with his head bowed and his eyes shut tight, absorbed with some internal difficulty. Across from me, a stocky man in overalls pressed a thick wad of blood-soaked paper towels to his forearm while he explained in detail what was unsafe about the motion he'd used with a box cutter; at the climax of his description, he lifted the paper towels to reveal the awful result. And there were at least three different exhausted mothers with small children who clung to their legs or lay on the thinly carpeted floors. The children whimpered quietly while streams of gray snot ran down over their bright red lips, and one stared at me suspiciously for upwards of ten minutes. Her eyes were dark, her lashes incredibly long. I smiled at her once, toward the beginning of the staring, but she didn't acknowledge it, didn't change expression.

When I was called in to talk to the pimply young doctor, I complained of back pain—too many hours in the car, I said. I also mentioned neck pain, from craning my head out the window. I felt these were plausible injuries, and found I could speak confidently when I concentrated on the part that was true. When I wanted to demonstrate my pain, I just tensed the muscles in my shoulder, which sent pain rocketing through the joint—pain I ascribed to my back and neck, areas I knew were difficult to diagnose with accuracy. The doctor absently picked at a pimple on his chin and asked me to rate my pain on a scale of one to ten. I decided my pain was an eight, a nine being burning to death, a ten, crucifixion. The doctor looked me over, shrugged, patted me on the back, and wrote me a prescription.

12

I kept pills in a vial in the console of my car as I drove past

the warehouses and factories and stevedoring businesses that populated my route. I also drove a stretch of undivided highway, two lanes each way, and delivered papers on all of the narrow residential roads that branched off and weaved their way up into the hills outside the city proper. Whole strings of large homes hid within the dense green foliage of those hills, though all a person could see from the road were the rundown little houses on truncated dirt or gravel drives that branched from the side of the highway at random intervals. Those little houses with their peeling paint and rusted motorcycles and long, dirty weeds depressed me, especially when the car's headlights illuminated a small bicycle, soccer ball, or other toy abandoned in the weeds.

The house with the boy in the sleeper was one of those houses.

13

During the occasional phone calls I received from her, Sara updated me on places she had taken Olivia: Pike Place market one day, the aquarium another, and always the park. She claimed Olivia enjoyed Seattle, which annoyed me, because how can a two-year-old even know the difference between one city and another? And there were things *I* wanted to show Olivia, too—it's not as if I didn't see my share of animals or greenery. Hanging branches whipped past the windows of the car as I drove up a winding road to throw papers at the houses hidden in the hills. I watched opossums scurry along the roadside ahead of the car, and when they turned to stare into the headlights, their eyes flashed like silver discs. Jogging through an industrial park one night as I delivered papers to multiple businesses while the car idled in the lot, I stumbled upon

two raccoons ransacking a garbage can. They spun to face me, annoyed by the interruption, and then, trading outraged bits of chatter, scampered grudgingly into the darkness. I saw plenty of squirrels and owls, too, and once even saw a wildcat dash into the roadside undergrowth. I thought Olivia would like to have heard about the animals, even if she wouldn't actually have been able to picture most of them, since the only animals she really knew were cats and dogs. But it wasn't something I would have been able to make her understand over the telephone.

14

What I thought would be Sara and Olivia's two week holiday had quickly become four, and then four became eight. On the telephone, Sara and I took turns telling each other the story of our life together. It turned out that though we were using the same characters, we were each telling a different story, and between our competing installments, we offered each other updates on events in the present. In Sara's story, for instance, I'd said I would do many things that I actually hadn't, so I seemed either deceitful, hapless, or both—and also, she and Olivia had found a playgroup right in Sara's parents' neighborhood. In my story, I was working like hell to pull through a tough time, but I was finding a conspicuous lack of support—I had also shaved five minutes off my record delivering time the previous night. In her story there was an entire thread devoted to thoughts on what love was and what it looked like and how it was demonstrated, and her parents had fixed up a room for her and Olivia to stay in. In my story the characters had definite goals, and it was important to establish what they each respectively and realistically wanted to get out of life and then to analyze whether the current situa-

tion was really going to help them achieve those goals, and also the last week had been so hot that I was sleeping in the basement. One thing our stories had in common were monologues devoted to doubts about whether the stories we were telling even raised the most important issues, and if not, what the most important issues might be, and if we couldn't figure out what the most important issues were, if it was possible that the important issues weren't even definable, that they were intangible and invisible but had real effects, like changes in atmospheric pressure or the erosion of stone. At the end of one particularly confusing evening of competing stories and traded theories, Sara said, "Well, at least Olivia's having a nice summer vacation."

15

A hazy, half-realized scene of my wife and daughter backing out of the drive in the car began repeating on a short loop in my memory. I couldn't even remember if I'd kissed Olivia before they left—I could just see her strapped securely in her carseat, looking at me as I waved to her through the side window. What remained clearest, the thing my memory rendered with the finest, most delicate detail, was the confused expression on Olivia's face. The memory didn't include the expression on my own face, of course—How could I see my own face?—and since children are such skilled mimics, maybe my daughter wasn't actually confused, but was simply mirroring what she saw in my own expression. Or maybe both of our expressions were authentic, and the same. It's a tough thing to unravel, the origin of an expression.

16

The next time I saw the boy, I was glancing through the

screen door as I always did, my eye scanning the bright rectangle of light. The adults were there as usual, smoking cigarettes and watching television, but standing at the door was the child in his sleeper, looking back at me.

As I drove away from the house and accelerated back onto the highway, I found myself so angry that I had to pull the car to the side of the road to try and compose myself. I stood on the gravel-covered shoulder and watched a freight train roll past until its whistle pierced the air for no apparent reason, and then I climbed back into the car and waited for a logging truck to go by. Its trailer was filled with the trunks of felled trees stacked eight or ten high—strings of wet, pendulous moss hung from the trunks, swaying heavily in the breeze as the truck roared away down the road. I pulled back onto the highway to resume my route, but the image of the boy in the doorway stayed with me. The night was one of the warmest of the summer, and though I was sweating profusely, I also felt chilled. I opened the vial in my console to retrieve another pill, but my fingertips found nothing, and I became confused, unable to decide whether the vial had simply gotten low without my noticing, or if I'd lost track and had accidentally taken too many pills. I felt jittery and anxious, and almost started laughing as I watched my hand shake when I reached to turn on the car's heater. By the time I threw my last paper a bitter nausea had risen in my stomach, as if my intestines had become entangled within some slowly winding gear.

17

I made it back to the station and into the bathroom in time to disgorge the contents of my stomach into the dirty toilet. After spitting the last of the humid brown

stew from my mouth, I sat on the bathroom floor, my back against the wall. When I looked up a few minutes later, the Deadhead was standing in the doorway. "Your car's running," he said.

"I'll be out in a minute."

"You need anything?"

"I'm a little sick," I said. "If you could just leave me alone for a few minutes?"

I closed my eyes, but I could sense him standing there, studying me. "What's your problem?" he said.

"What's going on, Dale?" I heard Carl ask, and when I looked up he was standing next to the Deadhead, looking at me like I was an animal that had wandered into the station.

"He's sick."

"Is his route done?"

"It's done," I said.

"You can't spend the night here."

"I don't want to," I said. "I just need a minute."

Carl disappeared from the doorway, but the Deadhead, whose name was apparently Dale, remained. "Why are you even doing this?" he asked.

"Why are you bothering me now?" I said. "Why at this moment?"

"Because this is a shitty job I do because my life is fucked up. You walk around here like you're better than us, which makes you an asshole. But you're probably right. So what are you trying to prove?"

I hoped that if I ignored him he would go away, but he didn't.

"You should at least take better care of yourself," he said. "Especially since you have a kid."

"How do you know I have a kid?"

"You were just talking about her last night. Or can't you remember last night?"

"Listen," I said as carefully as possible, "I don't need your help right now."

"You just puked into that shitty little toilet and now you're laying on the floor, but you don't need help. I used to say shit like that, too."

"So then you probably know how much I wish you would leave."

"Have a nice day," he said.

I heard his footsteps recede, and I was alone again.

18

Later, I stood up, splashed some water on my face, and walked out into the empty station. An oscillating fan on a stand had been left on. It nodded back and forth as if speaking to someone it was unaware had left the room. When I stepped outside, my car was still sitting exactly where I'd left it, the radio on and the engine running. It was the only car in the lot.

19

The next time I talked to my daughter on the phone, she informed me that *Doggy make a walk with a flower sky flower*. When the phone was transferred to my wife, I asked if they'd gotten a dog now, too. "No, but we did buy flowers," she said. She was focused on her new job as a receptionist in a real estate office, and I was the only one of us, it seemed, who realized Olivia was delivering important information. I'm sure my wife didn't write out our daughter's sentences on notebook paper and study them the way I did, with a mix of pride and concern.

"You don't sound good," she told me.

"I'm just tired," I said. "I've been working a lot."

"Other than the newspapers?"

"No, the newspapers are every night. It's not easy."

"How long are you going to do that?"

"As long as I have to."

I heard her sigh, and could picture her expression, the way she pursed her lips when frustrated. "Why haven't you ever, even once, asked about coming up to visit us?"

My jaw tightened. I could feel the blood pounding in my head. "Are you trying to get me to?" I said.

"Don't start that," she said.

"We own a house here. This is where I live."

"I don't even know why you're saying that. What does that mean?"

"It means I have to work to pay bills, to pay the fucking mortgage."

"That's not what I meant, and you know it."

"So you don't know what I mean, and I don't know what you mean."

"I'm going to say goodbye now," she said. "Don't call me again tonight."

20

I was still rehashing that conversation when I got to the distribution station later and found a rubber-banded stack of white envelopes on my table. I asked what they were, and the woman in the purple sweatsuit said, "It's bill night. They should be in the order of your route. You just keep them next to you and slip them in right when you're about to throw the paper."

"That'll take forever," I said. "They're ruining our night

so they can save the price of a stamp?"

"They're penny-pinchers," the Deadhead said. "They don't give a rat's ass about us."

"You know what?" Carl yelled down from the loft. "I've had enough of listening to all of you bitch and moan. If you don't want to deliver the papers tonight with the goddamn bills in them the way they need to be and the way it's your job to do it, then you can just walk out the door right now. And you won't ever have to come back, because I'll replace you tomorrow with someone who'll shut up and do the work."

Nobody said anything. It was the second time that day I'd felt like a schoolboy being scolded, and it disgusted me that I could still be made to feel that way. I bagged my papers as fast as I could and left without saying a word.

21

I tried to sort through the bills and shove them into the papers while I drove between addresses, but it was almost impossible to mess with the papers while driving. I hated the fact that my route was taking so long, and I replayed both the phone conversation with my wife and Carl's challenge over and over in my head, savoring my anger. When I reached the boy's house, rolled to a stop, and looked through the screen door to see a woman holding the boy in one arm while she smoked a cigarette with her free hand, I slammed the car into park and got out. The gravel crunched beneath my shoes as I walked up the drive, but the woman had turned and walked deeper into the house as if she heard nothing. When I reached the door and knocked on the wooden frame, two men sitting on the couch inside—they might have been brothers—looked over in surprise. The one closest, who had a dark

mustache and a thin strip of beard along his jawline, stood and came to the door. He wore a plain gray T-shirt and blue jeans that were turned up at the ankle above his bare feet, and as he came closer I could see that his hair hung to his shoulders in the back. "Can I help you?" he said through the screen.

"I've got a bill here," I said. "For your newspaper." He opened the door and I handed him the envelope.

"Who is he?" the man on the couch said.

"It's the newspaper boy, delivering the bill."

"Ask him if he wants a beer." The man on the couch raised his bottle as he returned his attention to the television. Though I was at an angle to the set, I recognized the images of a motocross race. Motorcycle after motorcycle flew into the air from behind a dirt hill, the riders in gear and helmets that made them appear only slightly less mechanical than the machines they rode.

"This isn't due right now, is it?" the man at the door asked.

"No, I just wanted to make sure you got it," I said. "A lot of people don't notice it in the bag."

The woman I'd seen earlier stepped back into the room. "Who is it?" she asked. Her cigarette was gone, but the boy was still curled in her arms. He was in his sleeper as always, and I could see that it was gray, with a pattern of small blue cars and red trucks. His head lay on the woman's shoulder as if he were ready to go to sleep there, but his brown eyes were open, and he looked at me with a combination of curiosity and fatigue. Both he and the woman were younger than I'd thought—the woman seemed in her early twenties, and the boy murmured unintelligible babble as he ducked his head further into the point between her shoulder and neck.

"The newspaper boy's dropping off the bill," the man said.

"Does he take checks?"

"We don't have to pay. He's just delivering it."

"We have the money, though," she said. "He's standing right there. I'll get the checkbook."

The woman left the room again, and the man looked at me uncertainly before opening the door a bit wider with his foot. "All right," he said. "You might as well come in."

I stepped inside and heard the screen door bang shut behind me. The man tore the bill open and examined it. "We don't even read it," he said.

"You're collecting money all night?" the man on the couch asked.

"No, I just saw you were awake."

"Aiming for a tip, huh?" he said, and laughed as if he'd made a tremendous joke.

22

The woman returned, holding a checkbook in the hand she wasn't using to hold the boy. She tried to press it open on the back of the couch, then stopped and leaned toward us. "Go with Daddy now," she whispered to the boy. He raised his head obediently and stretched his arms to the man at the door, who took him. The boy curled up on the man's shoulder the same way he'd been on the woman's.

"I've seen your son in the doorway sometimes when I deliver the paper. He's cute," I said. I reached to ruffle the boy's hair then, but the man twisted away, moving the boy just beyond my reach. Both of our movements had been automatic, I think, but my hand was left in the air in front of the boy and his father until I dropped it back to my side.

The man looked harder at me. "Sometimes he has a hard time sleeping," he said, and then, studying the bill, added: "And this isn't due today."

"It's not," I said.

"What's wrong?" the woman asked.

The man on the couch slapped his leg and laughed wildly. He pointed at the television, where a number of motorcycles were tangled on the ground and riders scrambled to pull themselves from the mess. "Always the same turn," he managed between laughs. "They always fuck up the same turn."

"How much is it?" the woman asked.

"We don't have to pay," the boy's father said, looking at me as if I'd claimed otherwise.

"But he's right here," the woman said.

"Take the baby and put him in his crib. He should be sleeping." The man's voice was tense, determined. He handed the child back to the surprised woman, who looked at me once more and then headed from the room, patting the boy's back and whispering to him. "What's your name?" the man asked.

"Travis," I told him.

"Listen, Travis. Next time you have a bill for us, just deliver it the same as you do to everyone else. I don't care if you see our light on, and I don't care if you see my son. Just throw the paper on the fucking lawn and move on. Understand?"

"I'm sorry," I said.

"I don't give a shit if you're sorry. You don't knock on our door in the middle of the night asking for money."

I nodded and closed the screen door behind me as I let myself out, then walked up the drive to my car. I didn't

look back until I put the car in gear and pulled away. When I did, I saw the man still standing in the doorway, watching me leave.

23

My hands shook so badly as I made my deliveries to the next few houses that I could barely manage to get the bills into the bags, and when I pulled back onto the highway again and headed further north, I drove past the turn I was supposed to take. It was just a small access road that led down into the industrial area where I would deliver to a couple dozen more warehouses before being done for the day, but suddenly it was behind me and I was still going. It was easier to drive straight and fast on the highway instead of continuing to struggle with the newspapers, whose plastic bags snapped in the breeze that roared in the open window. After a few minutes, as an experiment, I dropped one of the papers out the window of the car and turned for a moment to watch it tumble crazily along the road behind me.

The sky was starting to brighten in the east, which meant I was way behind schedule. I knew that if I just kept going north, though, I would cross the Columbia River soon, and would be somewhere new when the sun rose. I pressed the gas to the floor, and the car strained to pick up speed. When I tossed the stack of bills out the window, I watched in the rearview mirror as they exploded into a mass of fluttering shadows, like a flock of birds in the night.

THE PROBLEM OF THE HOUSE

The problem of the house is the problem of the epoch. The equilibrium of society to-day depends upon it. Architecture has for its first duty, in this period of renewal, that of bringing about a revision of values, a revision of the constituent elements of the house.

—Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*

When my older brother Greg and I were small—I had just started school, which means Greg must have been in fourth grade—my father introduced us to what he called a "magic word." I remember it distinctly because he actually knelt down and looked us in the eye as he told us about it. My father was tall and thin, and his gray hair, coupled with the perfectly round lenses of his Corbu glasses, left no doubt that he was older than the fathers of my friends. I had never seen him kneel before that, and I never saw him kneel again after it. When he bent down to speak to us that day, I heard his knees creak and pop and watched him sway a bit, and I realized for the first time that there was a fragility to my father—that he was not, perhaps, physically invincible. I suppose his kneeling even frightened me a bit.

After steadying himself, my father explained that there would be times when, for our own safety, he would need