

# Eat the Rich and Shit the Poor

by C. P. Boyko

Mr. Custard drove the speed limit. He was in no hurry. In fact, he had never felt less anxious in all his life.

He always stopped for hitchhikers, because driving bored him and he liked to have someone to talk to. He had in fact just come from Loyola (well, he'd been there a few days ago; he did not know what day it was now, exactly) but he saw no reason not to go back, if that was where circumstances conspired to take him. Francine had set up an appointment for him in Carbon, towards which he had more or less been heading, but he would have missed the meeting by now anyway, and he could always make it up later. He did not set great store by schedules or appointment-making like some people did, but preferred to arrive at places and events naturally, in the fullness of time. He was, in the lingo of Dr. Yard, "open to experience."

"Now what takes you ladies to Loyola?"

The one in the front with him, the skinny one, did not want to answer, but the one in the back had been raised with better manners.

"We missed our bus," she said.

"Going to meet someone," said the skinny one.

"Bad luck," said Mr. Custard, as if this were his professional diagnosis. "For you ladies, that is. Good luck for me!"

The skinny one made a derisive sound, and Mr. Custard realized that unflappable cheerfulness, which worked so well with middle-aged and older ladies, would have limited effectiveness with these two.

"Damn nasty old day to be stranded on the side of the road," he said, scowling at the dark patches of cloud hanging over the highway, which five minutes earlier he had been praising to the cashier at the filling station. He had been trying to get her to cash a cheque, but she'd insisted on calling the

owner.

“What, you mean to tell me *you* don’t own this place? A capable woman like you?”

She smacked her lips in distaste, though not at his flattery. “Wouldn’t care to neither. Loses money hand over fist.”

“Hand *under* fist,” he quipped, and she pressed a thumb into the cheek opposite the telephone receiver to hide a smile.

They stood on opposite sides of the counter looking out the unwashed window at the sky. Mr. Custard sighed contentedly, giving the easy impression that he was not in any hurry.

“Those clouds look ugly,” he said, “but, you know, they keep some of the heat off.”

“He don’t always answer on the first ring,” she explained, rolling her eyes to indicate that this was a kind of understatement.

“You know what you need?” He slapped his hand on the counter. “A place like this?”

“What’s that?”

“You need a ‘Going Out of Business’ sign.”

She thumbed her cheek, rolled her eyes, and shook her head.

“I got a bunch of them in the car. Cheap.”

“You sell ‘Going Out of Business’ signs?” She pulled the phone away to devote both ears to hearing what she was hearing.

He had not sold her any signs, but he could have. There came a point in every conversation when he knew he could sell someone something, borrow money off them, or pass a cheque on them. Technically, the signs were samples and he wasn’t supposed to be selling them at all; it was the *idea* he was selling to the man up in Carbon. But he could have sold her five signs, if he’d cared to. Same with the pump boy outside, who was still standing there gawping at Francine’s old beater, which Mr. Custard had led him to believe once belonged to Bonnie and Clyde. After that, he could have sold him anything, the car or just about anything else. It wasn’t a matter of pulling the wool over a person’s eyes, but lifting the veil from them. Mr. Custard ushered people across the border of their everyday experience into a

wider world, a larger-than-life world where heroes and villains still existed and marvelous things still happened—and might happen to *them*. For Mr. Custard, the joy of selling was in getting them to cross over; once that was accomplished, he often didn't bother to carry the deal to a conclusion. He hunted for sport, not for food. All the pleasure was in getting them on the hook.

He did not sell any signs or wait around for her to cash the cheque but left it with her, saying he would pick up the cash on his way back through in a day or two. In the meantime, as a “surety,” he said, he took one packet of gum.

He popped a piece in his mouth now, without for a moment taking his eyes off the highway. He held the packet out to the skinny girl, who made a buzzing chirp of refusal, so he reached back over the seat until he felt a stick slide out of the wrapper. In lieu of thanks he received another grunt, but slightly longer and with a note of apology in it. He decided that the girl in front, the skinny one, thought she was the leader, but the one in back, the chubby one with eczema who was always cleaning her glasses, followed her lead only when it suited her. From the first second he'd seen them across the road he'd recognized that his job would be to get the skinny one alone—that is, to get rid of the chubby one. Practically speaking this would mean winning the skinny one over to his side while alienating the chubby one, a feat which would itself entail setting the girls against each other.

He had not even begun to imagine how all this might be accomplished, but this suited him down to the ground. He did not like planning ahead. He believed that he was at his best when forced to act spontaneously, without forethought or, indeed, thought. Besides, knowing what to do next was almost like already having done it. He had a weak mind's eye, and consequently no taste for fantasy: visualizing a future event was the surest way for him to lose all interest in it. He had cultivated the habit of thinking only of the obstacle or challenge directly before him, never of its probable consequence or outcome.

He'd figure something out. It was only a shame that so far the chubby one had shown herself more disposed to be friendly. Well, he had his work

cut out for him. Dr. Yard shook his head wonderingly.

“What all’re your ladies’ names?” he asked, not too cheerfully. “I’m Custard.”

Again, the skinny one hesitated, and the chubby one waited to take her cue.

“Melissa,” said the skinny one at last.

“Connie,” said the other.

“But folks call her ‘Slim.’”

“They call *her* ‘Missy.’”

“Well, folks call *me* Custard,” said Mr. Custard diplomatically. “Sometimes Mr. Custard, sometimes Corporal Field Sergeant Custard. Sometimes Dr. Custard.”

He chewed his gum energetically, snapping his mouth open after every bite, and waited for this information to settle—not all the way, just a little.

“Sometimes Damn You Custard,” he chuckled, then made his face grim again when this got no response from the girls. “And how old’re all you ladies?” he said, and immediately wished he hadn’t asked.

“Nineteen,” said the one called Missy, with a slight quaver, as though she were guessing someone’s weight.

“Twenty,” said the one called Slim, with a note of gloating.

He admired her pluck but could not encourage it. Addressing the skinny one, he said, “That’s a fine age. Why, that’s not only the age you can legally drink at, but the age you can legally marry at.”

At this absurd notion, the girl made a noise that bore some resemblance to laughter.

Mr. Custard was gratified, but he was not born yesterday. He did not believe for a second that they were nineteen and twenty. He was pleased however that they had taken the trouble to lie. If they had come clean he would have had no choice but to not believe them. If they were as young as he thought they probably were—closer to half than to two-thirds his age—it might lead to trouble if he ever managed to get the skinny one alone like he hoped to. If they had told him the truth he would have had to claim that they’d acted older, or that he’d forgotten.

One of Mr. Custard's favorite pastimes was concocting defenses and alibis in advance. He rarely got to use them, however, which was unfortunate. The elaborate justifications that he constructed for his various acts were, in his own estimation, often as brilliant as the acts themselves. In his mind he laid out these excuses, with all the patience and skill of a bricklayer, before Dr. Yard, who in his imagination was always gradually, grudgingly won over.

Encouraged, Mr. Custard asked both of them, with a playful leer in his voice, "Are all you ladies *married?*"

They giggled in hiccups, like two sponges getting the bubbles squeezed out of them.

"Are all you ladies *drunk?*" cried Mr. Custard.

That did it. They split their sides. They giggled till they wheezed.

He wouldn't have to be so careful anymore, wouldn't have to scowl so much. They were on his side.

When they'd calmed down, the one perversely called Slim asked, "You reading all these here books?"

Mr. Custard smiled humbly and said, "I'm writing one."

The skinny one made a sound that might have indicated surprise or curiosity had she held it longer. As if translating this into English, the chubby one leaned forward and asked, "What's it about?"

"Psychology," he said.

He was no longer sure why he had taken the books; perhaps it had tickled him to imagine himself as a scholar, the sort of maverick genius who *would* steal books. In fact, he didn't care for reading, and hadn't glanced at so much as a newspaper since leaving high school. He sometimes boasted about this to Francine, who liked to proclaim that the magazines she fanned in front of her face were "bettering." He would then cite his own superior cleverness and long-time aliteracy as disproof, but the point was usually lost on her.

With most people he found it more useful to present himself as learned and widely read. After a few days in the hospital he had even borrowed a book from the floor nurse and let himself be seen with it in various contemplative poses about the ward and inner grounds. One day, shut up

indoors due to rain and with Dr. Yard away for the afternoon, he had been driven by boredom to actually open the book and look inside it. He got as far as the first few words of Chapter One—"The Duke and the Duchess were . . ."—when across the activity room Harold, one of the resident schizos, began throwing a fit, pulling antennas out of his head and stomping on radio waves. Mr. Custard carefully closed the book on his forefinger and sauntered over to watch the orderlies subdue Harold. He liked to stand nearby, looking cheerful and reasonable and sane, whenever one of the inmates went off their nut. Sometimes he even offered the orderlies a helping hand. When Harold had been injected and dragged back to his room, Mr. Custard returned to his easy chair and to the book. But he found that his eyes would not focus on the text. His brain simply rejected it. He realized he did not care the slightest goddamn bit about some goddamn worthless duke and duchess. What the hell did they have to do with *him*? It came to him then quite vividly, in a clarifying surge of rage, that reading was a sustained act of voluntary madness. To read was to remove yourself from life, to absent yourself from reality, and was there a better definition of insanity? That night he burned the book, a page at a time, in one of his ward-mates' bedpans, with matches he'd acquired from Mitkin, one of several sympathetic orderlies who realized that Mr. Custard did not belong there.

The skinny one called Missy cleared her throat and after a pause asked as casually as she could, "So you're a doctor?"

In his mind, Dr. Yard crossed his arms, shook his head, and grumbled, *Saner than all of us put together.*

"You girls waiting on someone?"

Slim turned around, startled. The truck had crept over to them from the gas pumps, crunching gravel all the way, but so many vehicles had already passed by in either direction that they had become almost invisible to her, like the groundhogs scurrying around the high school baseball field.

In the truck were two boys, eighteen or twenty. The one closest to

them, leaning out the passenger-side window, had shaggy brown hair and a sweet, knowing smile. Instinctively Slim took off her glasses and pretended to polish them, but before she could say how do you do, Missy, sitting with her back against one post of the giant GAS sign, growled up at them, “Not for you we ain’t.”

“Well, excuse us for sucking air.”

Slim gave them a parting look that was grim but not unfriendly. As the truck lurched forward, its wheels churning up dust, she thought she heard the driver shout something shocking: two words, one an adjective and one a noun. She was stunned; then she replaced her glasses and murmured, just loud enough for Missy to hear if she chose to, “Adolescents.”

Missy paid her no mind, and Slim wandered down the gravel shoulder to scratch her arm in privacy. She permitted herself seven seconds, with fingernails but through the sleeve, which seemed a minor enough lapse given the circumstances.

The adjective had been “fat.” She was not yet ready to contemplate the noun.

Missy was not talking to her, but that suited Slim just fine. As far as she was concerned, Missy’s silence was proof of a guilty conscience. She knew she’d caused them to miss the bus.

But Slim was damned if she was going to stoop to such adolescent behavior herself. She walked back, placed one hand on her hip and the other above her eyes (though the sun was in the other direction and almost behind the mountains now) and looked down the highway in the direction the truck had gone.

“Hell, I wonder if we shouldn’t’ve *taken* that ride.”

Missy issued a dismissive syllable through her nose. Missy preferred, whenever possible, to express her point of view non-verbally: she had found that sighs, grunts, and gasps were more difficult to refute than even the most eloquent arguments.

“Nothing we can do about it now,” said Slim, and offered a few of her grandma’s proverbs on the impossibility of undoing that which was already done and the inevitable improvement of a bad situation. She was afraid that

if she did not make light of their predicament she would cry.

Missy ripped a blade of crabgrass in half and tore another one out of the ground.

“We’ll have to take *some* ride,” Slim hypothesized.

“Those goons would have raped us and left us in the ditch to die,” said Missy, as though she relished the idea.

Slim shrugged and walked off down the shoulder. The sky was turning mauve above the pines, which swayed slightly in the cool windless air, as though drunk. Slim rubbed her arm for three seconds, under the sleeve but without fingernails.

“Adolescent” was one of her grandma’s favorite epithets, but now that Slim had run away, she felt more kindly towards The Gramophone. She almost wished her grandma were here to see Missy now. For the longest time, The Gramophone had had a very low opinion of Slim’s friend, and was always insinuating—through proverbs, homilies, and allegorical newspaper clippings—that Missy was a “bad influence.” (This was another of her pet phrases; there were few people on the planet who escaped being a bad influence on someone or other at some time or another.) But after Missy “ran away from home” (her suitcase, Slim discovered, had contained little more than cigarettes and shampoo), The Gramophone had started treating her like a saint. It was no longer Missy but her mother, Mrs. Acorne, who was the bad influence. At the breakfast table (while Missy slept in) Slim’s grandma now fulminated against not “peer pressure” but the creeping evil of “hereditary delinquency,” and newspaper stories about roaming gangs of wayward youth were replaced by tales of bank-robbing families and orphan murderers. “I’m more of an orphan than *she* is,” Slim protested, but her grandma seemed to think this clinched the matter: In her book, you were better off with two dead parents than an absent one. Divorce, in her book, was about the worst thing you could inflict on a child.

Slim might have been inclined to agree that Mrs. Acorne was bad, but you could hardly call her an influence. No matter how loudly or how often she shrieked at Missy to do this or harped at her to stop that, as far as Slim could tell it trickled in one ear and right out the other without leaving



behind the slightest residue. Missy did as she pleased, when she pleased. This was the very characteristic that had made Slim fall in love with her in the first place. She desperately wanted to attain that same imperturbable state of grace; she dreamed of a day when her grandma's harangues would slide right off her like grease off a hot griddle.

Even here, however, miles from home, she could not block out The Gramophone's voice. It was still in her head, still stuck in the same old grooves.

*Stop that scratching,* it said.

Slim yanked down the sleeve. She had already scratched more today than she normally permitted herself in an entire week. If she kept it up she was going to break the skin. But it was not her fault; she was, she reminded herself, under some stress.

It was, beyond dispute, Missy who had made them miss the bus. On finding the toilet at the filling station locked, she'd gone off in search of another. Missy, of all people—with her air of world-weariness and her talk of going to live with her real father in the city—Missy did not know that sometimes you had to ask for the key! But Slim knew better than to make a federal case of it. Missy had, of course, when she'd come back and found the bus gone, given Slim a look of accusation, but even then she had not dared say anything. For she knew what Slim's reply would have been.

“You can't seriously expect me to hold up a busful of people just for the two of us?”

Missy could blame her all she wanted with her eyes, but Slim, who knew that she was in the right, did not have to say anything, and could thus savor both her righteousness and her restraint.

According to the woman inside, the next bus was not due till the same time tomorrow. The bus company would hold their bags at the depot, but the girls had no way of getting into the city, and no money to pay for a hotel room—if there even was a hotel around these parts. When Slim had asked the woman the name of this place so she could try to find it on her map, the woman had replied, “Highway 9.” They were nowhere.

A semi-trailer hurtled by, about two feet away, and let out a blast of its

horn. This shocked Slim no less than the vulgar insult had done, and she had to close her eyes tightly for a moment to muster her nerve.

When she turned around, Missy was no longer sitting under the sign but had moved to the edge of the road. She stood there sloppily, as if her torso had been dumped onto her legs, and stuck her thumb out at a passing car. The car stopped.

There were three people inside. Missy peered in and said, "Sorry, we thought you were someone else. We're waiting for our friends." The car drove off.

Slim rejoined her friend. "What're you doing?"

"What's it look like?"

Another car approached and Missy pointed her thumb at it, but this one drove past without slowing.

"What'd you tell them we were waiting for someone for?"

Missy hummed through her teeth. This was one of her all-purpose sounds, which she used in a variety of situations to express boredom or disdain. She stared at Slim with dulled compassion.

"I didn't like the look of them," she explained at last. "There was three of them."

Slim clucked her tongue vaguely.

"There's two of us," said Missy.

"No kidding."

"You want to get murdered and raped?"

This, like many of Missy's questions, could not be answered by anything but a blasé or violent non sequitur. "Christ on a stick," Slim grumbled, "I'd kill for a cigarette."

"No you wouldn't," said Missy. Because she had introduced Slim to smoking, she liked to treat her as a mere dabbler.

"You ladies in need of a ride?"

A car going in the wrong direction had pulled over on the opposite side of the road. The solitary driver, a man in a bright red T-shirt, was leaning out his window as though trying to climb through it.

Missy showed Slim her sardonic, unsurprised face, the one she used to

say that she alone knew the answers to the questions that everyone else around her had not yet even formulated.

“Which way you heading?,” Missy shouted back.

Slim was, despite herself, impressed by Missy’s lackadaisical use of the word “heading,” which would never have occurred to her. The sudden awareness of her own juvenility curdled her stomach.

The man seemed not to have heard her. “What’s all your destination?”

“The city,” drawled Missy, tilting her head in the direction he’d come from.

“Which one?”

“Loyola,” drawled Slim, eager to break into the conversation.

“Shitfire,” the man grinned. “Me too.”

Before either girl could reply, he had ducked back inside the car and begun attacking the steering wheel. Through what appeared to be sheer strength alone, he managed to turn the car around and pull it across the highway—which luckily happened to be empty just then.

“Meet me at the pumps,” he called to them through the cloud of black exhaust that the car belched into the air.

The girls watched him leap out of the car and confer with the pump boy. He made several expansive gestures towards his vehicle, then hustled inside the filling station.

“Well, there’s only one of *him*,” said Slim tartly.

“C’mon.”

“You’re crazy.”

Missy looked around for her bag; remembering that it was already on its way to the city, she gave her look-around an air of sarcastic valediction, then launched herself towards the man’s car like a novice swimmer kicking off from the side of a pool.

Slim chased after her. “But he lied! He was going in the opposite direction!”

“He’s going our way now,” she shrugged, but slowed her pace. “He probably turned back to get gas.” She stopped altogether and crossed her arms as though waiting for Slim, who was right beside her, to catch up. “I

like his *car*,” she said at last through an impenetrable fog of sarcasm.

Slim looked at the car. It may have been a color once, but all the paintable surfaces had long ago been overrun by rust. There was a deep and complex dent near the back end which prevented the trunk from shutting properly. Over all of this—rust and dent and windows and tires—the entire vehicle was coated in a thin, even layer of dirt, like a rum ball that had been rolled in cocoa powder.

“It’s a hunk of junk,” Slim said. She noticed that the pump boy had come no nearer, but stood there still contemplating the car, or the vision of it that the man in the red T-shirt had conjured for him.

Missy made the sort of sound that an heiress might make at the sight of squalor. “Would a rapist drive around in that hunk of junk?”

Slim knew little of the automotive preferences of rapists, and doubted Missy knew more. But her question, as usual, was rhetorical, and did not admit much scope for reply. Slim responded with a sigh of expostulation, as if Missy had been twisting her words; but the argument was already lost.

The man came out of the filling station and waved energetically, like someone in a crowd. He half strode, half jogged back to the car, clapped the pump boy (who had done nothing more than remove the squeegee from its bucket) on the back and pressed a coin into his palm. “Thanks, buster.” Then he threw open the car door and called to the girls, “Hop in, ladies!”

“C’mon,” said Missy.

Slim, to deny that she had been coerced, made sure to reach the car first.

“There’s a dog back here,” she said. The dog looked up at her without raising its knobby, triangular head from its paws. Slim thought she probably hated dogs.

“That’s Good Dog,” said the man from the front seat. “He’s a good dog.”

Missy opened the front passenger door.

“What’re you doing,” Slim hissed at her over the roof of the car.

Missy made her eyes round and reproving, as if this were something they’d already discussed. “It’d be rude for us to *both* sit in back,” she

whispered, and climbed in.

The man started the car. Slim went around to the other side, where the seat was covered in books and papers and cardboard signs.

The pump boy watched the car till it was out of sight. “Didn’t look like much,” he muttered, and dropped the squeegee back in the bucket of dirty water. He hitched up his overalls by the pockets and trudged back inside. The highway, for a moment, was silent. The sun had gone down behind the mountains and the pines shivered in the windless air, as if chilled.

Mr. Custard told the girls about himself. This was as great a pleasure for him as it was for his audience, for he no more knew than they did what he was going to say. To his satisfaction, he learned that he had been born in Hawaii (which explained the T-shirt), had been raised amid six siblings by a stern saint of a mother, had rather listlessly excelled in his studies, had volunteered for the army and fought in “the war” (the horrors of which he left to their imaginations), had rambled around the country for a time, had boxed professionally (winning, he humbly implied, every fight), and had finally fulfilled his lifelong dream by becoming a psychologist. He was at first vague about his career, but the more he talked, the more he warmed to the topic.

“I’m a sane man working with insane men, that’s all,” he said. “But let me ask you: Ain’t that the description of every sane man that walks the earth? Let me tell you all a little secret. When I was all your age, maybe younger, folks around thought *I* was nuts.” He shook his head, sharing their disbelief. “I know, but it’s true. Even my own dear mama—who had the kindest, most generous soul of any woman that ever lived—even my own mama thought I was a bit, well, let’s say ‘different.’ I didn’t fit the mold. They didn’t have the word back then and she wouldn’t’ve known it if they did, but she thought I was *autistic*. That word comes from ‘auto,’ which is Latin by way of Greek for ‘yourself.’ Like ‘automobile,’ which is a ‘yourself-mobile,’ yourself *mo*-bile, that is, a thing you drive yourself around in. Well,” he chuckled, “that’s enough of my showing off. Another word for it is

‘selfish.’ That’s the word my mama used, as a matter of fact. She used to say I had no feelings for no one but myself. She used to say it was like nobody but myself existed. Harsh words! Now let me tell you the secret. You ever lied staring up at some clouds? Shitfire—course you have. You ever notice how it starts to feel it’s not *them* that’s moving, but *you*? Well, that’s what it’s like in the world these days for a sane man. It’s *everyone else* that’s nutty as a goddamn fruitcake but it’s *you* that starts to feel crazy! Eventually I figured it out, that feeling crazy is about the sanest way to feel in this world. *Crazy* people don’t feel crazy! Let me tell you, I got patients who think God is sending them private messages on invisible rainbows tied to their—well, certain parts of their bodies, let’s just say. And *those* sons of bitches are convinced, I mean dead positive, that they’re the sanest thing going. You tell them they’re mad as a hopping June bug making love to a March hare and they just smile and say ‘Pass the potatoes.’ So a psychologist’s job ain’t so different from the average person’s. Ain’t we all surrounded by sickos and loonies who think there’s something wrong with *us*? I mean, holy coyote: my own mama!”

Mr. Custard lapsed into a brief silence, mentally replaying with satisfaction his speech. Up ahead, an orange glow rose above the black pines and the blue highway—and for a moment his heart kicked excitedly. Then he realized it was just a town.

“Are all you ladies hungry? You all eat lately?”

The skinny one made a sound suggesting that she would never do such a thing, while the chubby one in the back, eager to accommodate, said that she was ravenous, but could wait.

Mr. Custard was not hungry himself. He never got hungry, really. He ate to pass the time or to make it with waitresses. At the moment he was tired of driving and felt the need to stretch his legs.

He knew the town. Hadn’t he been here just last night? He grappled with the temptation to pull in again at Rosie’s Roadhouse. He liked retracing his steps, enjoyed being recognized. These returns lent his days a harmony that he found almost irresistible, as he supposed the great poet Shakespeare must have found a rhyme irresistible. But as much as he would

have enjoyed a scene with the platinum-blond waitress, whose dog and books were in the back seat of his car, he could not see any way to turn that reunion to his simultaneous advantage with the girls. He was open to experience and welcomed complications for their entertainment value, but he understood in an abstract way that many people did not.

Sometimes the impossibility of doing everything at once gave him an almost physical pang of frustration. He had a poor memory and was averse to foresight, so to a great extent his life was circumscribed by last night's and this night's sleep. This confinement gave him leave to enjoy himself as best he could, but it also deprived him of the joys of anticipation and reminiscence. The future was whatever at that moment he wanted, and the past was whatever he said it was. The present was all that really existed. Whatever he wasn't doing right now could never be done.

"A joy postponed," he muttered, "is a joy forgone."

"Who said that?" asked the one called Slim.

"Shakespeare," said Mr. Custard. He always attributed anything epigrammatic to Shakespeare—or sometimes, lately, to Freud, whom he respectfully called "Dr. Freud."

He pulled up under a neon sign that buzzed polyphonically, like a horde of mosquitoes. "Here we are!" he cried, smacking the steering wheel. The skinny one hugged herself and looked out the windshield skeptically, so he improvised an explanation for his enthusiasm: "Best goddamn steak sandwich in a fifty-mile radius."

They got out of the car and Mr. Custard sniffed the air.

"This here dog . . ." began Slim, holding her door open uncertainly.

"That's a good dog," said Mr. Custard automatically. The waitress last night had yelled "Bad dog!" every time it jumped up on Mr. Custard. For some reason, dogs loved him. As a joke, he'd stolen this one and rechristened it Good Dog, but since then he had not given it much thought. Animals bored him.

"Slim's a *vegetarian*," said Missy, working extra syllables into the strange word.

"I am not," said Slim, slamming the car door and hurrying after them.

“I mean, not anymore. I eat meat sometimes.”

A waitress came forward with three menus.

“We want . . . a booth,” said Mr. Custard with tentative zeal, as if choosing his favorite of many favorite colors. “By the window. We won’t need those,” he said, waving away the menus as they were seated, the girls across from him. “Three steak sandwiches.”

“We don’t got steak sandwich,” said the waitress.

“You all got steak?” asked Mr. Custard, by no means dismayed.

“It’s on the menu,” said the waitress, with a meaningful glance at the menus.

“You all got toast?”

“It’s on the menu too.”

“You all got gravy?”

She sighed wistfully, thinking of other, better-paying jobs. “Ten cents extra with your choice of tater.”

But Mr. Custard abruptly abandoned his leading questions and asked the girls what they wanted. They were unable to resist the urge to pick up and peruse the menus.

“I’ll come back for all your orders.”

“Hold on a second, sister,” said Mr. Custard. “What’s the special?”

She looked at him distantly. “There ain’t no special. It’s all special.”

Mr. Custard had a rich, fruity, irresistible laugh that seemed to touch several notes at once, like a chord strummed on a guitar. The waitress and the girls were swept up into his laughter as into a street dance.

“It’s all special. I like that.” He put his elbows on the table. “Tell me though now: What’s *good*?”

The waitress whistled and seemed to shrink a couple of inches. “I don’t know if I’m the one to ask.”

“You don’t eat here?”

“Can’t afford to.”

Mr. Custard placed his hands palm-down on the table, closed his eyes, and said, “They *charge* you?”

“Not even a discount.”



“But you work here!”

She gave him a look like she felt a little sorry for anyone so naive.

Mr. Custard tried a different tack. He whispered, “How’s the cook?”

“Aw, Clem’s all right. Clean and all. Not like some of them.”

“What’s *safe*?” asked Mr. Custard.

She stared blankly out the window for a few seconds, then decided to give his question some thought. “The chicken wings come frozen in a big box,” she offered at last.

“Then we’ll have the wings,” said Mr. Custard grandiosely, to please her.

“Three?”

The skinny one grunted. The chubby one looked up from her menu and asked, “You got french fries?”

The waitress scribbled on her pad with a pencil.

“And bring us some bread,” said Mr. Custard.

“Just bread?”

“For an appetizer.”

“Something to drink?”

“Yes. Water. Coffee. No, beer. You ladies want something to drink? These ladies are nineteen and twenty,” added Mr. Custard with subdued pride.

“Naw,” said the skinny one.

“No thank you,” said the chubby one.

The waitress carried their order to the kitchen as though it were a disagreeable burden. Mr. Custard, who did not believe he had quite won her over, felt a strong urge to follow her. Instead, he pulled on his fingers till each of his knuckles popped, then looked at the girls slyly, as if he’d just performed a cartwheel.

“Hot in here, ain’t it?” he sighed.

The waitress dropped their drinks and a bowl of bread onto the table.

“I heard you had some excitement round here the other day ago,” said Mr. Custard.

“Who told you *that*?” She looked prepared to search out the source and

set them straight.

“No one. I was just passing through. I’m a salesman,” he explained.

“Well there ain’t no excitement round here since *I* was born,” said the waitress, and stalked off.

The girls looked at him quizzically. He smiled, unruffled. So they’d discovered he was a salesman as well as a psychologist. So what?

He stood and stretched, lifting his arms and twisting from side to side like he was wringing out a rag. “Excuse me,” he winked, “nature calls.” He made a friendly circuit of the entire room before exiting through the hallway that led to the toilets. He’d never had to piss so bad in all his life.

Missy had never met a psychologist before. The men she knew in Delyle, the men who’d been coming up to talk to her in Soda’s like they were renewing an old acquaintance since she was twelve, were all loggers and mechanics and mill workers. They all had the same cagey, distrustful, seagull strut, as if whatever direction they happened to be walking was just the long way round to what they really meant to get at. They all looked at you with the same beady, sideways squint, as if you were a bear too stupid to realize they had a shotgun behind their back.

Mr. Custard, on the other hand, had an honest gaze; he saw only what he looked at, and then he saw it completely. He had a face like a hatchet: pointed, probing, and sharp. His profile was normal, all his features in the right proportions (though perhaps his nose was a bit longer than most), but when looked at straight on, his head was shockingly narrow. His gaze, however, more than the shape of his head, gave her the impression of a hatchet. He swung his eyes about like a woodsman swinging an axe, lodging it to the hilt in one object after another. *Whoosh-chop*, he sank his gaze into her; *whoosh-chop*, into Slim; *whoosh-chop*, into the waitress. His eyes were a luminous light brown, with fanning rays of grey and blue. She had never seen such clear, such finely detailed eyes. They seemed to be in sharper focus than the rest of his face.

The girls sat there, each staring straight ahead, startled by the silence

that Mr. Custard had left in his wake, like the ringing in one's ears after a loud noise. Deprived of its object and focus, the competitive animosity that had been growing between them was suddenly laid bare, and neither would look at or acknowledge it.

Missy was convinced that Slim's inane friendliness was an assault on her own policy of laconic aloofness. In her experience with men, she'd found that acting cold and uninterested—even if she was genuinely cold and uninterested—was the most effective way to inflame their ardor. She believed that this tactic was succeeding with Mr. Custard and that Slim was only making a fool of herself, but she resented the distraction of Slim's stupid, stubborn presence, which prevented him from proceeding in the usual manner.

In the car, listening to him talk, Missy had felt a strong urge to abandon her policy and tell him everything. Here was a man who understood people. Here was a man she could talk to! The only thing stopping her was Slim. Anything she might have said would have sounded ridiculous in front of her friend. Why, thought Missy miserably, had she brought her along?

Slim would never have dared to run away if Missy hadn't done it first. Indeed, Slim seemed compelled to mimic Missy's every act and attitude. At first she had found this flattering, but lately it had begun to annoy her that Slim had no personality, no substance of her own. To be reflected in an empty mirror was no honor.

The most aggravating of all Slim's homages was her affectation of hating Mrs. Ludlow, her grandmother. If Missy hated her own mother it was for good reason: because Maude didn't give a howling damn about her. Screaming at you was only a habit of hers. She'd screamed at Mike and Ted, too, and it had about as much to do with anything you'd done or said as with the weather. Missy only played hooky or stayed out all night to give her mother's shrieking condemnations an occasional justification. Slim, on the other hand, played hooky and stayed out all night to get a rise out of her grandmother, whom she then despised for chastising her. And she seemed to despise her praise as much as her criticism. Once, Mrs. Ludlow had been telling Missy a story about Slim as a kid. "She was such a *clever* girl," she

was saying, when Slim sprang up from the table and grabbed a lumpen clay ashtray that she had made for Mrs. Ludlow when she was six or seven. (Missy had made just such an ashtray herself, though she could not remember what had become of it.) “Why do you even *keep* this hideous thing?,” Slim had screamed. “You don’t even smoke!” Then she’d smashed it on the floor and stomped out of the room like she was stepping on the devil’s face. A week or so later Missy noticed that the ashtray was back in place on its shelf: Mrs. Ludlow had glued it back together.

The waitress brought three plates of wings, two of them balanced on the inside of her arm, and a basket of french fries.

“Your friend, he all right?” she asked, as if it wasn’t any of her business.

Missy made a sound of indifference. Slim said, “He just went to the, you know—nature calls.”

When the waitress had gone, Slim moved around to the other side of the booth and looked out the window.

“His car’s gone,” she said.

Missy refused even to be surprised. With a minute mental adjustment, she corrected her mistake and accepted that Mr. Custard was, in fact, after all, no different from any of the men in Delyle.

“He said he was a salesman,” she murmured, poking at a chicken wing. It was red, pimply, and slimy, and she could imagine it being torn off a real chicken.

“He said he was writing a book,” said Slim. “But the books he had—” She shook her head. “*A Dictionary of English Surnames*, that was one.”

“That T-shirt,” said Missy. “My uncle Lewis had one. A blue one, but the same coconuts and trees on it and things.”

Slim nodded. “That dog,” she said.

Missy pursed her lips in agreement. “Nobody calls their dog ‘Good Dog.’”

Slim held up a french fry, peered at it skeptically, then laid it back among the others.

“We can’t pay for this,” said Missy suddenly, as it occurred to her.

“We got no money,” Slim agreed.

“Shitfire,” said Missy.

“Holy coyote,” said Slim.

“Eat the rich and shit the poor,” they drawled in unison.

The girls’ eyes met briefly, then glanced away.

With both hands, Missy lifted Mr. Custard’s untouched glass of beer to her lips. It tasted sour and grainy—not at all what she had expected. She masked her surprise with a grimace of satisfaction.

“Helps me think,” she confided, sliding the glass back to its original position.

Slim nodded and pulled the glass to herself. She sniffed it a little before sipping, Missy thought, but otherwise betrayed no lack of familiarity with the beverage.

They drank the beer surreptitiously, watching out for the waitress and returning the glass to the same spot after each swallow. Missy felt that, in some small way, justice was being done: if they had eaten the food *they* had ordered, it would be stealing; but drinking Mr. Custard’s beer was making *him* the thief, which was just what he deserved.

A family of three came in, turning their bewildered heads in every direction as if trying to figure out where the food was. The waitress led them to a table.

“When she takes that order,” Missy whispered.

“She’ll have her back to us,” Slim finished.

The waitress hung back, looking their way occasionally. Then the man with his family beckoned.

“Now,” Missy mouthed.

The door chimed incriminatingly, but no one shouted at them to stop; and then they were outside and running, first from nervousness and fear, then for pleasure. Missy felt that all the blood in her body had gone to her head and was churning around in her brain like water in a washing machine. Behind her, Slim let out a whoop that echoed down the silent street.

The sky had gone from blue to purple and black. The town was even smaller and dingier than Delyle. On one side of the road was a line of dusty shops, all dark and closed; on the other was a sparse copse of pines. A car

turned onto the road, its headlights stretching the girls' shadows out from their feet, and they slowed to a brisk, skipping walk as it passed. Missy felt like laughing, but she funneled the impulse down into her limbs, swinging her arms and kicking her feet as she walked.

Soon the cold of the night had pinched off even this lingering energy. She put on her coat and hugged herself, trying to hold on to the warm glow from the beer and the triumph of their escape. She had begun to recognize, as an abstract proposition, that they were stranded here, in the middle of nowhere, with the cold of night settling in, without a ride or any money or any hope of finding a place to sleep, when Slim drew up short and grabbed her arm.

“That’s his car.”

It was parked, roughly speaking, in front of another diner. The girls approached without hesitation, as if it were their own. Indeed, Missy felt an impulse to throw open the door and crawl inside and wait for Mr. Custard as if nothing had happened. At first sight of the car, she had felt simple relief; but as this hardly seemed adequate in the circumstances, she clenched her teeth and tried to feel angry.

“We should cut his tires,” she said experimentally.

“We should . . . steal his dog,” said Slim, scratching at her eczema.

The dog, still in back, lifted its head as their shadows passed over the windows.

Grinning and shivering, they stared at the diner, which gave off a provokingly warm and soft light.

Missy articulated a new grunt, one comprised of promise, threat, and resolve.

“C’mon,” she said.

They strode side by side across the parking lot; but when they reached the entrance, Missy held the door for Slim, who was left no choice but to go first.

The wind picked up and across the road the pines shuffled restlessly. In the car, the dog cracked its lips in a squeaking yawn, then fussily laid its head back on the seat.

When Slim awoke, she was alone in the car—even the dog was gone. Through the windows she could see nothing but vertical bars of blackness against granular swaths of grey. Trees and snow. She was shivering and had the feeling that she had been doing so for some time.

She remembered falling asleep. Anyway, she remembered the warmth of the car, the headlights scrubbing the highway clean before them, and the reassuring flow of speech from Mr. Custard beside her. As long as he went on talking she could keep an eye on him, as it were, even with her eyes closed. He'd been telling them about his first fight, the first moment he realized that he had a rare gift for knocking people down. It had not been a violent story. He had spoken almost lovingly of his opponent, a big, dull-witted boy three years older than him. The way Mr. Custard told it, the fight had been nothing but a dance followed by a sleep.

Where was she? She quickly corrected the pronoun in her mind (she would not yet face the fact that she was alone): *Where are we?* She did not remember turning off the highway, though she thought she recalled the gramophone-like crackle of gravel beneath the car's wheels. She remembered, she thought, waking briefly, and asking him where they were going. "To get gas," hadn't he said? She'd fallen back asleep.

A thought, or the prospect of one, blinked on in her mind, like the status light on the radio at home that came on when it had warmed up and was ready to be played. She ignored it, scratching her arm instead.

The inside of her head felt hot and sticky, like a feverish mouth. She could not peel apart individual ideas. The seeping cold, the black bars of pines, Missy's absence, and the matter of how she—*they*—had come to be here, all had to be taken together, in one unmanageable clot.

She remembered walking towards Rosie's Roadhouse with Missy, feeling quite sure of themselves. Then Missy held the door for her, and Slim hesitated, realizing that her friend did not, after all, know what they were going to do, what they were going to say.

He was at the counter with his back to the door, talking to two

waitresses.

“War hero?” he said, shaking his head with slow, measured scorn. “No, I don’t think I care for the term. After all, what’s a hero? How’s it defined, that’s what I want to know—and who’s defining it? A person of exceptional powers or extraordinary abilities? Exceptional compared to what? Extraordinary compared to who? Once you realize most folks are monkeys or crazy you realize it don’t take much to be a hero and won’t thank no son of a bitch for calling you one. Shitfire. And never mind what’s a hero—what’s a *war*?”

Slim sat down two stools to his right, leaving a space for Missy. But Missy did not take it, sitting instead on Slim’s right. That, then, was how it was going to be: Missy was going to just go on holding the door for Slim.

Well, to hell with that.

“Howdy,” she said. Her voice was calm, but she realized she was scratching her arm. She took off her glasses and began to wipe them with a napkin.

“Get you girls something?” asked one of the waitresses, leaning against the refrigerator like she was keeping it upright.

“Why, these here ladies are my nieces!” cried Mr. Custard, slapping the counter with unfeigned joy. “Ladies, these here are Lorna and Lola, friends of a friend of mine and therefore friends of mine and friends of my friends.”

“How *do* you know Irene anyhow?” asked the other waitress, slumped over the counter and peering sideways at Mr. Custard as if he were some clever, skittish animal in the zoo.

“I come in here all the time,” he said.

“Then how come I never seen you,” she demanded, charmed by his furtiveness.

Mr. Custard turned to Slim. His gaze went into her and she felt for a moment, till she tore her eyes away, that she had never seen anyone so happy to see her in all her life. He was not in the least alarmed or embarrassed by their arrival.

“You ladies want something to eat?” he asked. “They got the best damn burger in town here. In fact, I’ll have one of them fellas myself. But hold the



mushrooms.”

The waitress leaning against the fridge said, “Our burgers don’t ordinarily come *with* mushrooms.”

“They’re extra,” said the other.

“Then I’ll have mine *with* mushrooms. Make it *double* mushrooms.” He turned to Slim and cupped a hand to his mouth in a mock whisper. “That way they got to make it fresh.”

“We make everything fresh!” cried the one slumped over the counter, pleasantly scandalized.

“I’ll have the same,” said Slim, blushing in anticipation of their laughter, “. . . but hold the burger.”

They didn’t laugh, so she kept her face straight and pretended it hadn’t been a joke.

“Something for you, honey?”

Missy grunted, then grunted again, annoyed that the first grunt had not carried her meaning. “The same,” she clarified.

“Same as him or same as your friend?”

“As him,” she said, with a grunt of impatience.

Slim emitted a grunt of her own. They had come in here allied against him, but now it seemed that Missy had abandoned both their alliance and their grievance. For a moment she keenly hated both of them, Missy and Mr. Custard. She wanted to crush something, but had nothing to crush but her own feelings, her own desire to crush something. She lashed out by lashing inwards, and did the last thing she wanted to do, which was stay put and smile, and said the last thing that would normally have entered her head: “And I’ll have one of *those*,” she said, pointing her finger like a gun at Mr. Custard’s half-finished beer. “Same as him.”

“You old enough for that, sugar?”

“Eat the rich and shit the poor,” said Mr. Custard with placid indignation, “these ladies are my *nieces*. They’re nineteen and twenty years old. Old enough to drink, old enough to get married, by God.”

“What about you, angel?”

Missy glumly shook her head, and Slim felt a flush of triumph.

They ate and drank and Mr. Custard, through an ever-present mouthful of half-chewed burger, regaled them with tales of his childhood. It took all of Slim's attention and ingenuity to correlate what he was saying now with what he had told them in the car. Now he had only five siblings—but she reasoned that earlier he had been counting himself. Now his family lived on a milk farm—but she supposed they must have milk farms in Hawaii too. Again the most salient figure of his youth was his mother, but it was not easy to reconcile the woman as he described her now with the one who had called him “selfish.” Now he said that she had been dissatisfied with all her children except for the youngest—namely, Mr. Custard himself. He never came right out and said that he had been her favorite, but he was conspicuously absent from the litany of disappointments she had suffered at the hands of her offspring. One had died in the war; one had died in childbirth; one had married the wrong kind of man; one had dropped out of high school and run away from home; one had been arrested on charges of “unmotivated assault”; one had ended up in the booby hatch. There were more sins than there were children—but Slim figured that some of his siblings may have committed more than one.

That he might be lying occurred to her only fleetingly and abstractly. He showed none of the hesitation or embarrassment of a liar, and the details he furnished were too richly embellished to be the product of anyone's mere imagination. She supposed that some facts had possibly become garbled or confused with the passage of time and through numerous retellings, but she did not seriously doubt that the stories he told had a firm foundation in his own personal experience. Where else could they have come from?

And unlike any liar she had ever known, he did not seem at all concerned that you believe him. He did not swear, or repeat himself, or say “honest.” He contradicted himself and neither blushed nor took any pains to resolve these contradictions. The fact that he didn't even bother to be consistent proved that he wasn't lying; the stories he told must be, in some fundamental way, true. She even began to question her earlier doubts. Wasn't it possible that he might need a dictionary of names to write a book on psychology? Wasn't it possible that he was both a psychologist and a

salesman? Maybe he sold psychological supplies; or maybe he drove around recruiting new patients, and it was just easier to say “salesman” to a simple-minded waitress than to explain.

But then he did lie. After they finished eating he patted his belly, then his pockets, and told the waitresses that his cheques were in the car. He asked Slim and Missy to help him bring the books in for their friend. But when they were outside, he told them to hop in. Then he’d driven off without a word.

So she knew what he looked like when he lied. He looked the same. Nothing changed. They were miles down the highway before she even realized that they weren’t going back.

“We didn’t pay,” she said.

“You girls have any money?” asked Mr. Custard. “Didn’t think so! So you see, we *couldn’t’ve* paid, even if we wanted to.”

There was none of the exultation that she’d felt when she and Missy had run out of the first diner. She felt now only a sucking emptiness in her chest. She felt like a cheat.

“Is that why you ditched us? You didn’t have any money?”

He nodded deeply, like someone making a long-overdue confession. “Of course,” he said thoughtfully, “even if that wasn’t why, I’d probably say it was. But it was,” he added quickly, “it was.”

In the back seat Missy made a perturbed sound, and added the gloss: “Why *don’t* you have any money?”

Mr. Custard shook his head slowly and sadly. “My hospital.”

Missy made a sound indicative of the inadequacy of this reply.

For a long time he stared out the windshield at the rolling highway.

“It burned down,” he said at last.

Slim had felt better as soon as he opened his mouth; it was some time before his meaning caught up with her relief. She realized now that it hadn’t mattered what he’d said, only that he’d said something. He’d taken the trouble to justify himself. It was like the answers her teachers had offered to so many of her questions about the universe: She was happy to accept just about any answer other than “I don’t know” or “Because.” To be told that

atoms were composed of sub-atoms or that things fell because of something called gravity was satisfying because these *were* explanations, because they were answers. Knowing that her questions had answers was enough. The only insupportable universe was a universe in which things happened for no reason.

“Is that true?” she asked softly, naively imploring him to reassure her, even though she knew what he himself had admitted: that his answer would be the same whether he told the truth or not.

She had seen him lie to those waitresses. Had she seen him, at any time, tell the truth?

The outline of the thought that had blinked on in her mind now returned, and this time she looked at it. Her grandma was going to kill her—because Mr. Custard was going to kill them both. This realization came to her in her grandma’s voice: *He’s a psycho.*

He was not a psychologist. Those were not his books. This was probably not his car. He had taken her and Missy out into the backwoods in the middle of the night. Missy was already gone. He would come for her next. He would have a knife or, what was somehow worse, a rope, and someone opened the car door and she screamed.

“Jumping Jesus, what the hell, I thought you were sleeping,” cried Missy, startled into loquacity.

Slim jumped out of the car, holding her hands up like blades. “Where is he?”

Missy groaned at Slim’s ignorance. “Went to find gas,” she said at last, getting into the seat that Slim had vacated. “Thing’s below E already.”

“This ain’t a filling station. This ain’t nowhere.”

Missy hunched her shoulders for warmth. “He went to siphon some out of some goddamn tractor or something I guess. He had a, you know, a gas can.”

They could see their breath in the yellow light that spilled from the car onto the snowy gravel. Slim wanted a cigarette, then felt dizzy at the returning thought: Grandma would kill her.

There was a sound in the distance, a sharp crack like a branch snapping

in the wind.

Had he shot the dog?

“Get out the car,” Slim said.

“You’re crazy.”

Slim knew she was not being reasonable. He’d only stopped to find gas, she told herself; he’d gone off with a jerrycan, not a gun. But it was no use. The certain dread she’d felt moments ago had not had time to dissipate, and was still being pumped around inside her by her heart.

Slim heard his footsteps, quick little crunches like a mouse gnawing at a wall, before she saw him. He was running towards them, clucking to himself like a hen, and every so often bubbling over into some shout of jubilation: “Oodilolly!” or “Holy coyote!” He was not carrying a jerrycan. Slim took a step back from the car.

Before he could reach them, a black shape came bounding out of the woods and attached itself to his leg. It was the dog. Mr. Custard let out a scream—not of pain or even anger but sheer incredulity. He whipped and thrashed his leg madly, and with a whimper the black shape came loose and fell skidding to the ground. Almost without breaking stride, Mr. Custard lunged and kicked the dog with all his might, then threw himself into the car, started the engine, and slammed it into gear. Slim jumped back, shielding her face from the spray of gravel and ice. Missy, who had had one foot out the door, shouted incoherently, perhaps to Slim. Then, to keep herself from falling out, she had to pull the door shut—and just in time, as the car fishtailed, shot down the road, and disappeared into the pines.

Slim stood listening to the roar of her own heart; then, as her pulse subsided, she could make out another sound in the distance, a drawn-out rasping sound, like someone continuously sliding open a window that had not been opened in a long time.

She went to the dog, and was at first relieved, then only doubly frightened, to hear it whining. If it was hurt, if it was dying, she would have to do something.

She crouched and placed a hand on its lumpy skull until the animal stopped growling.

The moon was overhead, but, in the direction from which Mr. Custard had come running, a dim orange glow had appeared above the black outline of the trees. She walked towards it. The dog followed, at a distance.

The road curved and began to widen, the gravel gave way to deep tracks of frozen mud, and the pines parted to reveal a farmyard, littered with hulks of machinery and tufts of grass, all bathed in the same undulating orange light. The rasping sound grew louder until it became a crackling roar. She rounded the farmhouse and saw the fire.

It was a barn, or had been. The fire had consumed all the structure's details in the brilliance of its blaze, so that it looked like a child's drawing of a barn: thick black lines for walls, a gaping black opening for a door, and clumsy black triangles for rafters, which had already begun to sag. Shivering, Slim walked towards it, and imagined she could feel its heat.

A man stood motionless, as if suspended in gelatin, halfway between the house and the conflagration. A stick lay in his outstretched arms like a dead thing that he was afraid to touch. As Slim came nearer she saw that it was a gun.

He looked at her, and at the house, and at the barn. His eyes were wild and unseeing, as if he'd just been struck blind.

"What happened?"

"Burnt my barn," he said thickly. "Burnt my goddamn barn."

"Why?"

He peered at her then, flames in his eyes. "Who're you? Where do you come from? What do you want here?"

She opened her mouth but nothing would come out. She shook her head and looked around dismally.

"My dog," she blurted at last, scratching her arms till they bled. "My dog's hurt."

Dr. Yard was talking to him but Mr. Custard was finding it difficult to concentrate. He had never felt so sleepy in all his life. There was a prickly pain in his leg where the dog had bit him, and a clenching pain in his

shoulder where he supposed the crazy man had shot him—actually *shot* him! —shot *him*! He'd never been shot at before, not in his entire life! He hadn't felt anything at the time but a cold wet sting, neither pleasure nor pain; but now it felt as if his stomach had relocated to his shoulder and begun digesting itself. His blood, too, was everywhere. He was surprised at how dark and rich and thick it was, almost like oil. He was disappointed to find that it tasted like salt, only salt.

The girl had her face pressed against the window like she was trying to draw air through it. Everything was slowing down, time was coming in drops—the better to help him register the situation's novelty. But every so often the highway snapped its neck suddenly to one side as if trying to buck him off. Dr. Yard was talking to him—not, he thought, altogether without approval—but he could not distinguish the words.

The same thing had happened at the hospital. Whenever Dr. Yard spoke to him at any length, his words dissolved into mere gabble, strings of isolated syllables more like Morse code than human speech; and even his face, as Mr. Custard watched, would gradually fragment into its constituent features, so that he found he could attend to the man's spongy nose, or to the scraping of his eyelids over his flat grey eyes, or to the flapping of the dewlap beneath his chin, or to the slick, darting movements of his wet tongue, or to the flecks of spittle collecting in the corners of his mouth; but he could never attend to all of them at once. The harder he tried to make the sounds fit together into words or the words into sentences, the more they disintegrated, and it was the same with the face. Two eyes plus one mouth plus one nose equals one face, he assured himself. But it wasn't true. Two eyes, a nose, and a mouth did not make a face. Something was missing.

The car was almost out of gas. He was amazed that it hadn't run out already. What would he do when it stopped? He didn't know, and the not-knowing excited him. Anything could happen! He was open to experience. His mother called it "selfish," but Dr. Yard, a professional psychologist, had called it being "open to experience."

But Dr. Yard had been wrong about his mother. She *had* been a saint. She would never have let him be thrown in jail for hanging a few lousy

bucks' worth of paper! And if he had never been put in, he would never have had to pretend he was nuts in order to get out. She had always taken good care of him; he was her baby. But Dr. Yard didn't like that story, so Mr. Custard told him another one.

The thought of his mother made him think of Francine. Would she be angry at him for missing his appointment? Well, she'd certainly forgive him when she saw the blood. She would clean him up, put him to bed. He would cry a little; that would help.

The scene suddenly bored him; it had happened just like that hundreds of times. Francine in her nightgown, screaming at him, then comforting him; slapping his face, then holding his head to her freckled chest. Francine with her young body and her old face, the skin that seemed to have slipped half an inch down her skull. No, he couldn't go home. Anyway, it didn't matter. He'd never make it. He was almost out of gas.

But that had happened before too, plenty of times. He could see it now, unfortunately; the not-knowing was gone. He would wait, preferably for a woman, or else a family, and would hitch a ride into the nearest town. He would tell them a story and borrow five bucks. He would pass a cheque at a filling station. He would go to a restaurant and pick up a waitress. He would go back for the car, or he would call up Francine collect and he would cry and she would come get him.

He yawned. He was sleepier than ever. The ditches on either side of the road yawned with him. The highway bridled, trying to shake him. Dr. Yard smiled grudgingly, shook his head in admiration. "Get some rest," he advised. "You've earned it."

He was talking about the fire. It had been a good fire.

Mr. Custard stomped on the gas pedal. The highway straightened out, momentarily subdued.

"Hey, slow down," pleaded the doctor—or perhaps it was the girl, the skinny one. Perhaps it was she who had been talking to him all along. He realized he'd gotten her alone. He'd won. The thought gave him no pleasure. She was not, after all, very pretty.

Mr. Custard had made something beautiful, and while he'd been



standing there admiring it, he'd been shot at by a crazy person.

"Life!" he muttered, almost tenderly.

A pair of headlights appeared on the horizon. He went towards them in slow motion.

Here, he thought, was something new.