

At this point it was very late. We weren't sure where we were heading next. We were all a little tired, but we just couldn't figure out where to go. Certainly I couldn't ask Laura to let us crash at her place, and everyone else I had met in my brief tenure in Ocean City was most definitely asleep by now. Eric's friend (w./ chain) had been asleep when he and John stopped by, banging on her door. She woke up and they drank her beer and on consignment they had brought back Zach and I some cans of Budweiser, which we cracked open and sipped wearily while we tried to figure out just where the fuck the next destination was. It felt like a sort of purgatory, the quiet beach and the sound of the surf and the winds kicking up even cooler, standing around sipping beer among these shadowy figures and not knowing where to go, not knowing when it would all end. My compatriots mumbled amongst themselves and lit cigarettes and my mind was whirling, spinning, slipping across the ocean like a greased slide, back into the past and thinking again of Alice. I was thinking about the first time I had actually *seen* her, trying to remember when it was. It was at school, in the cafeteria, fourth period lunch. The din of hundreds of teenagers shoveling down lunches and talking as much loud talk as they could before the period was over, before silence once again took precedent in endlessly boring classes. She used to sit at the table next to mine. I sat with the "bad" kids, frumpy grungy kids who wore tattered flannels and shot rubber bands at each other and sniffed Ritalin and scribbled out incoherent poetry and argued vociferously about the lyrical exegesis of Kurt Cobain and his ilk. They terrorized girls with bad manners and threw food at freshmen. Alice sat with her two artsy friends, the ones with the darker more humble attire, the ones who were in clubs, the ones who were better students and probably secretly more wayward than any of us. The first time I ever really took any notice to her, she was showing her friends some drawings she had made and they were all laughing in that controlled (dare I say, mature?) manner

the  
Pilot  
and  
the  
Panda

that they shared. I was trying my best to eat my lunch without some punk snaking all my fries and I could see some of the drawings in the sketchbook: kid-like drawings of cartoony boys and girls kissing and shooting each other with guns and driving stolen cars. It was like a perfect fantasy world on paper, with crude crayon smudges and silly faces. It was so free, so imaginative, so open. It wasn't dark and tortured like the heavy metal grunge world inhabited by my tablemates. It was something new. It was the world I wanted to be in, not the "bad" kids table, where food was mashed into inedible piles of mush and Pixie Sticks were sucked down like air and Primus songs were sung like anathematizing anthems. Her world was smart, chic, hip, slick, anti-authoritarian, *new*. I hung around at that table because it was the only place I fit in, and I didn't know any where else to go, but when I saw Alice with her red corduroys and her black turtleneck and her short dark hair and her shiny smile that lit up like fluorescence when she laughed and her almost awkward mannerisms and her fantasy world of drawings...that's when I knew that there were *other* worlds, secret worlds, magic worlds. I knew her world was only an idea, only a silly daydream she had conjured up when class was going way too slow and the swirling winter world outside the classroom window seemed so much more promising...but I was convinced that her world could be a *real* world someday, if only she had the right person to help her create it, tangibly, concretely, once and for all...and I was unwavering in my belief that *I* was just that person. Tim Ludlow, my insane cohort extraordinaire, was at our lunch table that day – he had cut class to come spend some quality time with our go-nowhere deadbeat crew, and perhaps pick up the stray sophomore girl or two – and I asked him who she was, since he knew pretty much anything one needed to know about life in Lenape High School. If she was a pretty girl, Tim knew her. If she was a just a girl, Tim knew who she was.

Erik "Who...which one?"

Bader I pointed her out.

"Ohhhh...her? Shit. I forget her name...Alice, I think her name is Alice. Yeah, *Alice*. That's it...wait...*is* it?" He tapped another kid on the shoulder and asked him a few discreet questions, then he turned back to me.

"Yeah, I know her alright. That's Alice *Worth*. She's a space cadet, Dave. I mean totally out to space."

“No good?

“*Hell* no!”

“Really?”

“Really and truly my friend. I remember now, I asked her for her number once, and we talked on the phone, I mean for like...an hour or so...and it was cool...I *guess*...but she never called me back. I mean *never*. And I called her a few days later and she just...she just blew me off. She’s a fucking *bitch*. Cold as ice.”

He stared over at her with a disdainful look. “I am telling you Dave, no good, no *good*...”

But this only made me all the more interested. Weeks went by with myself stuck in this inescapable reverie, myself always watching her at lunch, waiting for that spectacular laugh, that perfect face lighting up like starlight. It drilled down deep into my stomach, the feeling that I could never step into her world, that she would never notice me over at my stupid table, that she was a part of something I could never be a part of. I dated girls, I attempted to do homework, I hung out with all the crazy kids, but Alice was always that North Star shining at the far end of the horizon, that thing I was secretly working my way towards. She sat less than a yard away from me, but the distance between us could have been measured in leagues. But no matter what I was up to, who I hung out with, what girls I dated, there was always Alice, that perfection I could not obtain, that other thing I wanted so fucking bad.

It was spring by the time I got her number. I had discovered a go-between, a mutual friend, who “barely” knew her but nevertheless had her phone number. That was sufficient. It was destroying me, eating me up from the inside out. I had been dating Jessica Calvino but that didn’t matter at all, there was still Alice, *Alice*, that perfect *something else*, that world that was impenetrable to me, and why? Why? What was it that kept her always at the circumference of all my thoughts? Something that only a young kid of barely seventeen could explain to you. Something special and stupid and silly and perfect. Something beyond all rationality. Something *else*.

I had done my best to discover everything I could about her life: what neighborhood she lived in, what music she liked – very simple things a young kid would *need* to know – and none of it seemed to add up to anything. No one seemed to know who she was or anything at all. She was utterly mysterious, she was

the  
Pilot  
and  
the  
Panda

pretty, secretive, and apparently she only kept a handful of friends. She kept to herself. Everyone in school was an open book, but Alice was something else, she existed on a plain that none of us could step into. She was apart.

I remember passing her in the crowded noisy hallways, and always I would strain to get some semblance of eye contact, but to no avail – she always kept her glance either straight ahead or down. My heart nearly exploded in my chest when she walked by. I began to take note of her wardrobe: cardigan sweaters, button up shirts, turtlenecks, corduroy pants, fitted jeans...a record bag instead of a book bag. She always kept her hair to chin length, or else right past her ears. The length of her hair, and remember this is '93-'94, made her stand apart from pretty much any girl in the school. It was her own significant statement. I duly took note of this. I took note of everything about her.

When I finally called her on the phone, I tried to explain who I was, but she didn't have a clue. All those months of sitting at the table next to mine, and myself always staring over at her, dreaming, noting her every motion, laugh, unintelligible comment...never *once* had she ever even looked over or noticed! *Nothing!* But it quickly became apparent that she did not like me because she knew the kids I sat with at lunch and she did not like them in the least. So she associated them me with them. I tried in vain to explain to her that I wasn't like them (my mouth numbly trying to shape ideas into words that I didn't even know) but it was simply no good. I was one of them to her and that finished it. She became impatient, she said she had to go. I tried to visualize where she was in her house, if the spring rain outside my window looked the same outside hers. I knew what neighborhood she lived in already. I wondered what posters she had on her wall. The phone-call ended a failure. Under any other circumstances I would chock something like that up to a complete waste of time, but with Alice it was different. Because now I knew her *voice*. I was just a pot-smoking bumbling teenage waste of time, ornately brilliant but a lackluster student, scatter-brained and aimless. Though she didn't speak much, Alice's voice proclaimed sophistry, style, assurance, and something *else*...it was as if Alice was a portal, a gateway to some other place, a hidden world wrapped up inside her mind and her body, something always dreamt but never actually experienced. She was the Brave New World, the western gold

Erik  
Bader

rush, the opening of the Pacific, the discovery of America, the first man on the moon. My unmanageable teenage mind tried to wrap its claws around her evasive substance but everything slipped through, intangible. I put her on a pedestal. In my mind she became a thinker beyond thinkers, a keeper of the secrets. To me, her world was a sophisticated world of unimaginable dizzying heights, dove winged and tender-souled ambience, the throng 'twixt high heaven and the flower, the *other* place where what was once imagined is *now proved*. She became *everything*, the Paradisiacal end figure...and my efforts to talk to her on the phone amounted to *nil*.

But I refused to be daunted by my initial failure. I was determined. Though we never spoke at lunch, I began to give a nervous wave *hello* to her as we passed each other in the crowded noisy hallways, as the kids rushed to classes and made shoddy plans at lockers and sneaked into bathrooms for secretive cigarettes...and she actually reciprocated. Her hand holding her bag at her shoulder, thumb under strap, her four free fingers pointed up nearly to heaven and answered my wave hello back, humbly, her mysterious eyes meeting mine for a second then returning to their initial downcast position. In class I would try to list the qualities that I needed to improve in myself:

1.) *Poise, style, stance.* FASHION!

2.) *Complete knowledge of all obscure alternative music. Is "Ride" good?*

3.) *Knowledge of all known available World Literature*

4.) *Geography. Cartography. Geophagy. Topology. Unknown islands. Locations of lost cities...*

5.) *Difficult skateboarding tricks, i.e. the McTwist.*

6.) *Re-read all National Geographic Cards. What's an aye-aye? Are koalas really endangered?*

*Conclusion:* BECOME RENAISSANCE MAN

I eventually called her again, myself in my bedroom, watching my face carefully in the mirror and trying to look dead serious,

mature, worthwhile. My stupid hair fell into my eyes and I pushed it back behind my ear, then tucked in my shirt for good measure. The conversation went a little smoother, I mentioned music and due to my field-work I now actually knew about bands she liked, The Pixies, The Sundays, Ride, The Smiths... although she was already “over” the Smiths (damn it! The facts had come from a girl who had been in the Chess Club with Alice fucking *last* year). We talked about school (she was in clubs, I was on drugs, so it wasn’t a great topic), about Mount Laurel (she hated it, I liked it, whoops again), about ourselves (I would tell her pretty much *anything*, she was very mysterious and gave very few grounded facts), and we talked about art (I liked Picasso, she liked guys who’s names I had never heard of and would never be able to pronounce). Through all those early phone conversations I remember trying earnestly to let her know that I was *like* her, I was one of her kind, we were on the same page...that her and I were very much different than everyone else...that we thought on a different *level* than everyone else, and though I was thoroughly convinced that she surpassed me in every thinkable stratum, still, I wanted her to view me as an equal. It seemed completely out the question, totally impossible, and in the end she would always cut the conversation short, stating she had “something to do.” What it was she “did” was something I never knew (nor would she say), but I was pretty sure that whatever it was it would have undoubtedly blown my fragile young mine into smithereens. I was always too afraid to ask.

But I began to drift away from her, my precarious bobbing raft always sighting her bountiful island then being pushed back to sea by the dreadful swell of turbulent waves. Most of the time I couldn’t even spot her in the hallway. I would draw maps in my notebook of the school, trying to plot her course of direction. None of the schematics matched up. It was as if she knew the location of secret passages. Spring was beginning to bloom, and on one bright and breezy day we actually came into real contact. She had been dating this kid named Brad (stupid name!)...the kids called him “Beck” (stupider name) because he sort of looked like Beck (this is spring, ‘94...the *Loser* single had just hit the radios. Beck: Prototypical Slacker. Mildly dreamy? Good hair. Dammit). Our Beck, being something of a loser himself, had asked me for a ride home, as many kids were wont to do if they didn’t have a car, and at first I turned him down, as I was

Erik  
Bader

wont to do with someone I didn't really know well, but then it struck me: this kid is dating *Alice!* It was something, anything, a chance to get close to a real insider, a man who has stepped into the fire. I said sure, why not, need a ride? You got it kid! And sure enough, he said the magic words: *Do you mind if my girlfriend comes too?*

Shudder shudder butterflies shudder.

Beck and I made our way through the manic evacuation of the three o'clock hallways and stood outside by the yellow busses, lighting up our first cigarettes in hours and waiting for Alice. I distinctly remember the way my heart thumped madly as I nervously puffed on my Marlboro, and my knees turning into a mushy gel beneath my jeans. This should be simple, I thought. I am giving her boyfriend a ride home, she merely comes along. She sits in the back seat, alone. Beck and I will talk and smoke more cigarettes. You drop them off at Beck's place, no big deal. Enter: Tim Ludlow. Hey man, hey Tim. Shit, I think, now *Tim*, being the senior car-rider, a notorious caller of *shotgun*, will now sit in the passenger seat. Beck and Alice: in the *back* seat. *Together*. But no matter! I will talk to Tim and smoke more cigarettes and we will seem confident, close friends, like hey look at *me* Alice I have a close friend you think I need anything else? Hell no! I have a car, I have a best friend, I have places to fucking go! I'll drop you off at your boyfriend's house, this fucking *Beck*, and you will be *stuck* there! Who *knows* how you'll eventually get home! But...what if she's staying the night? She can't stay the night. No one can stay the night anywhere when they're in high school. But...what if she needs a ride home later? Will she call me? Me, who obviously has this amazing car that can go virtually anywhere, like I mean if I had enough gas we could go to California I mean we really could there's nothing stopping us hey Alice let's ditch your boyfriend and school and Tim Ludlow let's split for California! We'll live under an orange tree and eat oranges all day long! Why the fuck not?! I couldn't take Alice to California. Or could I?

It was too much. Circumstantially grounded factual datum aside, she was coming to meet *me* and I was waiting for *her* and she was going to get into *my* car and I was giving *her* a ride *somewhere* that *she* wanted to go. This is a Major Fucking Event. This is a Very Big Deal.

She emerged like a dream: plaid skirt, snugly brown sweater, pushing her hair out of her face and smiling at all of us. Beck

walked over to her and gave her this big awkward hug. I tried to make small talk with Tim. I couldn't bear to look at this. My nervous system had jumper cables clamped to it, all my nerves standing taut in erect attention like a tactical unit preparing for the barrage. She was only a few feet away from me, laughing with her nervous laugh at some inane comment from Beck, looking self-consciously at her brown shoes. Only in high school can a crush of such incalculable magnitude occur. When else does one have such pure, forbearing vision? Such a clear, unregulated fixation on the lovely and simple things of the world? Alice dearest Alice. *Alice.*

And there she was, in my car, seated in the back seat with her bozo boyfriend, and Tim my comrade-in-arms riding shotgun and telling me stories that no longer interested me. Amazing I didn't crash the car with all the backward glances in the rearview I made, watching closely as Alice laughed brightly at Beck's pointless conversation. We drove down Hartford Road as the early spring fields opened up on both sides, the yellowing afternoon bright and cool, and inside I could feel things welling up within my being, brand-new irrepressible desires, boiling into my temples and throbbing madly through my skull.

There's stone inside of us, stone that is created from a broken heart. When your heart is first broken, and you've put it back together, you find that the pieces were glued together with stone. When everything ended with Jen Cunningham, I knew I was different, I knew that now there was stone inside me. I was aware of it, but it didn't bother much. I moved on, I continued, I lived. But when we pulled into Beck's neighborhood, with all the new houses, some of them not even completed yet, and coasted up in front of the driveway, and I was waiting for them to do something, say something, get out of the car, thank me, anything, and I looked in the rearview mirror and saw her kissing *him*, there in the back seat, her hand placed gently on his cheek, her index finger just touching his ear, her eyes closed and her pale cheeks flush and rosy...that's when I *felt* that stone in there, all cold and granite and huge, the boulder of Sisyphus, the mountain where Prometheus was bound, that big awful rock.

And so they left. And left myself and Tim Ludlow, in the car, two lone men, not admitting it but lonely in the big, big world, the world where we thought we could have had anything, but there were perimeters, there were walls, walls made out of stone. I drove off out of the neighborhood in silence, and Tim didn't

even tell any more crazy stories, because though we didn't mention it, he *knew*, and he let it be in its own strange way, heading off into the bright and cool afternoon.

Memories drifted and knocked around in my skull like a broken pinball game, and years later there I stood with my strange pals facing the darkened waters of the Atlantic Ocean, the clear sky broken by streaky sinews of clouds sliding like serpents over the stars...and I knew that somewhere out there in all that inky infinite darkness Alice was alive, dreamily living her own separate life. Right now she was most likely asleep, her dark hair spread out on a white pillow, perhaps an arm around her...or was she alone? Alone like me? And did perhaps the strained yearning of my thoughts and memories reach out to her, gliding through the dark night and to where she lay, touching her in her gentle sleep? Of course not. Of course not.

"Let's go out to that jetty and have ourselves a look!" John said, absurdly breaking our silence. We had all been standing on the beach for what seemed an eternity, all of us lost in thought and wondering where the hell we were going to spend the night. I looked over at the jetty. It was only a few yards up the beach, jutting out into the black lapping waters. Only days ago I had spent an entire hot and sunny afternoon under a steel-blue sky on that same jetty, playing the lackluster lyrical loser, trying to write poetry in my notebook and doing a totally lousy job of it. Usually I would write half a poem and then in frustration I would crumple it up and throw it out into the sun-dazzled water, for the fish, as a warning against evolution: "*Listen forget about it, stay where you are...look what happens!*"

I went with John out onto the Jetty while Eric and Zach stayed behind, Zach throwing shells at Eric and Eric using a stick to pick up jellyfish and fling them at Zach. They were bored out of their minds. We had to walk carefully; the rocks were slippery with moss and dampness. The water crashed mercilessly against the rocks and foamy surf splashed in our faces. The moon had broken free from the clouds again and its light splashed down in a silvery pool just south of us. As we made our way, I noticed the outline of a dark figure standing at the end of the jetty, its back towards us, staring out towards the sea. I didn't think anything of it, figuring it was just some old fisherman or something, and we continued making our precarious way. Apparently he heard us talking over the crash of the surf and turned around.

the  
Pilot  
and  
the  
Panda

“Nice night!” I called out, giving a little wave. I could barely make out his features, but I could see he was wearing light-colored shorts and no shirt.

“—*m rocks*,” I heard him say, barely audible over the crashing ocean sounds and the wind which was picking up again. John, a few feet ahead of me, had stopped, and he put out his hand in front of me, as if to say “hold on.” I didn’t really get it but I stopped and stared out at the end of the jetty, seeing the guy still standing there, almost menacing like. He was barely a few yards away now, blond hair and barefoot too. I wondered how he had managed to make his way all the way out to the end of the jetty over those sharp rocks without any shoes on.

“Get off my rocks,” he said, not really looking directly at us.

I looked over at John, who was making like he was about to turn around. Strange, because John was never afraid of anyone. He was pretty big guy. Any time someone gave you a hard look and John was around he’d stick up for you. He was a good friend like that. And as consequence I always felt pretty confident around him, knowing he’d stick up for me no matter how absurd the circumstances might be.

“This is nature!” I yelled into the din of whooshing wind. “We can all *share*, can’t we?”

The kid just stood there, staring at us. Again, his voice came across the mossy stones. “I *said*...get the *fuck* off of my *rocks*.”

“We better go,” John muttered to me. The water continued booming and crashing against the jetty and the wind and foam whipped around us.

“Are you crazy?” I said to John. “This is fucking *America*, man, and there is no way I am going to be denied my God-given right to stand on some goddamn rocks and stare out over the ocean by some goofy kid with no shirt and no shoes at two in the fucking morning. No fucking way!”

“*Get the fuck off of my rocks!*” the kid bellowed, and the light of the moon reflected a silvery flash at his side: he had a knife.

“Oh, I get it,” I said, and we started walking back cautiously across the slimy jagged rocks. I looked back again: it was a goddamn *machete*. I just couldn’t believe it. And he just stood there, holding it out like some sort of crazy swashbuckler, staring at us, filled to the brim with pointless hate. Just as we were nearly off the jetty I suddenly got this wild notion, and I whispered loudly to John “*Get ready to run!*” and I turned

around and screamed at the top of my lungs, “*You know what man fuck you and your stupid rocks! Fuck you! I hope you fucking drown!*” and I flicked him off and started to run, and John started running too. I figured it would take the kid at least ten minutes to carefully tiptoe across those sharp rocks, but I heard the sounds of feet *slapping*, and when I looked over my shoulder, there he was, running at a *full sprint*, the machete blade shining madly in the moonlight.

“Holy *shit!*” I said. “*Run!*”

Eric and Zach were still busy playing with shells and jellyfish when they saw John and I running top motherfucking speed over the sands and back towards the boardwalk. “*Run!*” I screamed at them, and they looked back and saw the Machete on the Jetty Maniac blazing his way across the rocks, in hot pursuit.

“I gotta put on my fucking *shoes!*” Zach screamed, but when he got a good look at that knife he just grabbed the shoes and started running. Broken shells be damned, what else could he do?

The four of us made the straight run towards the boardwalk, and behind I could hear the incoherent snarls of the Machete Madman, who by now wasn't far behind us at all. I was so tired and drunk and high that I wasn't sure what was going to happen. Would he slash us the fuck up? Didn't that only happen in the movies or the newspapers? And could it happen in...*Ocean City*? I pictured the headlines: Four kids slashed to bits on an Ocean City Beach by a kid their age with a machete. The kid told our reporters: “I *had* to do it. One of them gave me the middle finger!” It was absurd, completely twisted, this kid had no reason to run that fucking fast and waste so much energy chasing four, yes *four* kids all the way over a dangerous jetty and over the beach, barefoot, all because one of them yelled a few four letter expletives at him. But sure enough, there he was, gaining on us, and we pulled ourselves through the railing of the boardwalk, sprinted across, slid under the railing on the other side, and hit the streets as fast as we could, poor Zach still holding his shoes in his left hand, his feet slapping audibly on the pavement. We cut a sharp left on Central and then hopped another fence, cut through a yard, made an erratic right down an alley, into another yard, and then hid behind a shed, all of us panting and pumped full of adrenaline.

We sat there in dead sweating silence for about ten minutes, Zach putting his shoes back on his swollen feet. Across

the  
Pilot  
and  
the  
Panda

the dewy yard was a small boat on blocks and a dark house. When we finally figured the coast was clear we got up and climbed back over the fence, heading back out under the dim streetlights, laughing to each other.

“What a fucking *nutcase*,” I said. “I mean what’s wrong with our generation? I mean I’m not expecting *peace* and love and the Sixties or anything, but there is seriously no reason in the goddamn world for some teenage lunatic to go chasing a bunch of losers around a summer resort town with a like ten inch *blade* in the middle of the fucking night just for walking out on some stupid *rocks*.”

“Well I mean you *did* curse him the fuck out,” Eric said, still laughing.

“Yeah?” I said. “Well *fuck you* too! I mean *seriously*, guys! Who cares what people say? It’s just *words*! I mean would you *kill* someone because they called you a monosyllabic four-letter word? Or *chase* them for that matter? It’s just sounds that come out of a mouth. *God!* What the fuck is *wrong* with this world, anyway?” I threw my hands up in the air as a genuine gesture of general exasperation.

We continued through the quiet streets. Here and there you could hear a faint late-night murmur coming from a porch, the mumble of tired voices sharing a final smoke, or else hear the electronic babble of a television show oozing out from an open second-story window. Crickets filled up the otherwise soundless spaces. A few blocks from where we had been hiding we came across a group of kids all milling around a big two-story house. All the lights were on in the house.

“Hey you guys better be careful!” I announced to the crowd of kids as we approached. There was around a half-dozen of them, just a bunch of beefy jocks with baseball caps and sports-related t-shirts and tan shorts.

They all looked over in our direction.

“Yeah,” I continued, pointing back in the direction of the beach, “there’s like this fucking *lunatic* out there right now running around with a goddamn *machete*! I’m like not even kidding you.”

I figured I was filling my duty as a good-natured summer vacationer by informing them of these lurking dangers in the night.

“Where did you see him?” one kid asked me.

“Out on the jetty.”

Zach piped in with a song: “*Don’t go on the jetty tonight...crazy guy with machete toniiiiight!*”

“Blond hair?” another kid asked.

“Yeah, I think so. And no shirt!”

“That’s our friend Mike,” a third kid said seriously. They were beginning to encircle our group now. They looked kind of tough, too.

“You didn’t say anything to him, did you?” the first kid asked.

“Ah, no...what do you mean? We didn’t say anything. Why would we say anything to him?”

“Good,” the kid said. “Then you’re pretty much safe, dude. As long as you stay off his rocks and don’t say anything to him he should leave you alone. You sure you didn’t say anything to him?”

“*Hell* no,” I said. “He had a fucking machete.” These kids looked like they had been drinking for five days straight. They had these serious vacant jock faces on under their baseball caps. People like these kids become politicians. Or cops. Yeah cops. Cops that beat you the fuck up for no reason. The world is run by these things. Frightening thought...

“What did you say his name was?” Zach said.

“Mike. But he likes to be called *Satan*.”

“Oh,” I said.

“Yeah so if you see him dude, just call him Satan. He responds to *that*.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I said.

We all stood there in the middle of the street, my group all looking seriously menaced by these big dudes. What was going to happen next?

“So like what’s wrong with that kid anyway?” Eric asked rather bravely.

“Well we had this party here tonight,” the biggest of the kids said. “Kegger. And the fucking pigs showed up, and Mike—”

“You mean Satan,” John corrected.

“Yeah, fucking Satan had this whole fucking sheet of *acid*. And like these fucking pigs were like coming up the stairs and he was like, in the bathroom. So he just ate the whole fucking *sheet*.”

“The whole sheet?”

“The whole fucking sheet, dude. And then he like jumped out the fucking window and we like—”

the  
Pilot  
and  
the  
Panda

“The second story window?”

“The fucking second story *window*, dude. And we were like, we didn’t know where he went. But I figured he just went out to the jetty. I mean that’s where he *always* goes when he’s trippin’.”

“He’s trippin’...often...I guess?” I asked.

“Oh shit yeah, dude. All the fucking *time*, man. That’s all that fucker does, dude. That’s why he thinks he’s *Satan*, see?”

“I get it,” I said.

“So like yeah, it’s a good fucking thing you dudes didn’t see *say* anything to him. You didn’t say anything to him right? Good. Good. ‘Cuz he’d cut your fucking *head* off if you did. I mean a whole sheet of acid in him, fuck!”

“Yeah good thing,” I said anxiously. “Well hey, thanks for the...the *story*. We’re going to like...head out now. Uh. Catch you guys later, I guess!”

“Yeah, see you around, dudes.”

We walked off into the night in no particular direction, just glad to have extricated ourselves from Satan’s highly menacing friends.

The streets were serene. There was a thin mist that had drifted up off of the beach, snaking its way around through the shadowy streets and across the dewy lawns, adding a thick mystery that was difficult to enjoy in our end-of-tethered, overwhelmed, and totally exhausted states. The plan was to head home, back to the city, but John was far too tired to do any driving any time soon and I still had to retrieve my stuff from Laura’s, who would be waking up in just a few hours. Eric suggested we kill the rest of our time at the Chatterbox, where we could drink coffee and “stay out of more trouble.” There was no arguing with this idea.

We walked down 9th under the misted street lights, past the silent motels and closed restaurants, the empty streets devoid of any activity, the traffic lights arbitrarily changing from red to green to yellow all by themselves. The bright misted lights of the Chatterbox standing proud on the corner of Central, with its big signing proclaiming “The place where the Town meets!”, were comforting to behold. On the wooden bench next to the Coca-Cola machine and the wet fog-glistened newspaper boxes, a weathered old man sat smoking a cigarette, looking wearily ancient and bored out of his mind. I wondered what he was doing there smoking in the wee hours of the morning before the

sun came up. We walked into the diner and were surprised to see a few early morning kids, still drunk and sobering up with coffee, sitting around and chatting drowsily. We took a seat in the corner and John ordered us a round of coffees. I was already hungry again, but John was running out of money and could only order a plate of french fries, which we drowned in ketchup and picked at like vultures. On the wall was an amateurish painting of Ocean City High School, circa May 1940. It said OC HS but it looked to me like an old version of the Chatterbox. The kids in the picture looked healthy and happy, a bunch of young and cheerful boys and girls sipping floats and chowing down on fat, juicy hamburgers. My mouth watered and my heart swooned. There was a menu up on the wall in the picture, with great sounding food and ridiculous prices: Ham&Cheese .25¢, Grilled Cheese .20¢, Tuna Salad .20¢, Liverwurst .15¢. There was also a map of Ocean City on the wall and some other vintage posters. I sipped my tepid coffee and stared at all the posters and the map. We were all too tired to talk.

The sun eventually reared its angry hot head and we stumbled out of the diner, frazzled, red-eyed, and beat beyond all belief. We walked through the already humid streets, the sun rising once again triumphantly over the ocean, the streets once again beginning to hum with traffic, the early morning joggers getting their early morning exercise, the old people walking with no apparent direction, everyone yawning, sleepy, and happy to be alive instead of at the office or wherever the “Real World” was for them. John’s car was all the way up on 17th street, and by the time we got there I was nearly dropping with painful fatigue. I gave him muddled directions to Laura’s place and fell right asleep.

When I awoke it must have been far past noon. I heard an insistent tapping on the window and at first I didn’t even know where the fuck I was. All I knew was that I was in the back seat of some car and it was a zillion degrees in there. I felt disgusting, like a trapped and panting dog. Every pore on my body was oozing sweat. I managed to open the door and sort of spilled out onto the street, covered in a sheen of sweat and aching all over. I was greeted by Eric. He wasn’t wearing a shirt and his hair was wet.

“We all went swimming,” he said breathlessly. “We’re too tired to sleep.”

the  
Pilot  
and  
the  
Panda

“Okay,” I said, yawning and lighting a cigarette. I coughed and looked around, squinting in the extremely bright sunlight. We were parked in front of Laura’s place.

“Did you...talk to Laura?” I asked.

“No,” Eric said, looking insane and dripping wet. “We knocked but she said come back at noon.”

“What time is it now?”

“Sometime around that. Or else one. Fuck I don’t even know.”

“Okay.”

John and Zach came wandering down from the street. John leapt upon me like a big wet dog. “Wake up man. Wake up! We just went *swimming!*”

“Alright, *alright!*” I said. “Jeez, get *off* me, will you? You’re getting me soaked.”

“Oh stop your *crying*. I’ve just found the energy to go all the way. I mean all the way, man. I can do anything. *We* can do anything! Isn’t that right, boys?” He shot manic glances over at Zach and Eric, who both nodded deliriously.

Jesus, I thought to myself: these guys look *dangerous*. Like something out of Clockwork Orange. How could I be held responsible for them, exposing poor nice sleepy Laura to their outrageous madness?

“I’m like going to get my stuff out of Laura’s,” I said cautiously. “You guys can just...wait here.”

It didn’t work. Zach was already at the door, banging as loud as he could, turning the heads of an elderly couple sprinkling their lawn right next door. Before I could say anything else, there was Laura, standing fresh and well rested in her bathrobe, looking as puzzled as could be.

Inside the apartment, Laura went up to her room to change and gather up my things while my cohorts passed around a freshly packed bowl that they had found on the coffee table.

“Aren’t you guys going to *ask* before you, you know, do that?”

John looked up, exhaling sweet-smelling smoke. “Nah, I don’t think she’ll care. Hey Laura, want a hit?” Laura had just stepped back into the room, wearing these cute tan shorts and her trademark baby blue t-shirt.

“Uh, sure,” she said, almost reluctantly taking the bowl from John. She gave me a worried look and then pulled her lighter out of her pocket and did it up.

“So when are we going to *eat*?” Zach said.

“I don’t have anything to eat here,” Laura said, passing the bowl over to Eric. “You guys want to go somewhere?”

“Fact is we don’t have any money,” John said.

Laura looked over at me again, her brow furrowed. “I figured as much. Okay, well you guys are leaving today, right? I probably won’t be seeing any of you for a long time, so how about I’ll treat?”

Nobody disagreed with her.

Laura took us to a little breakfast joint right around the block. We all ordered big breakfasts, though I wasn’t really hungry any more. Coffee, pancakes, more coffee, eggs, orange juice, bacon, sausage, toast, more coffee. John was trying to get Laura to give him money for gas and tolls to get home, even after we had ordered all that food.

“You’ve got to be out of your mind,” she said.

“How about if I drink this entire thing of maple syrup?” he said, holding up the syrup container by the handle. The sun was shining way too bright through the big window and I was feeling ill just looking at all that thick brown syrup.

“Are you serious?” she said.

“Twelve bucks, come on,” he said.

Laura looked at everyone at the table, but we all were poker faced.

“Okay,” she said. “Twelve bucks. But...I mean jeez...you don’t have to drink all of it. Just...y’know...*some* of it.”

And he did. He popped open the top and just started pouring the stuff down his throat. No one could watch. It was just way too awful. He drank the entire container.

“Oh...*man*,” he said, setting the empty container down on the table. “That...that’s...*sweet*.”

Laura gave him fifteen dollars, completely and utterly disgusted.

And so, ourselves now tired *and* wired, Laura thoroughly bewildered, we said our farewells (John giving Laura a sticky syrup-kiss on the cheek, much to her complete revulsion), I took my things (assorted poem drafts and notes, and my new Emily Dickinson book), and we drove off into the sweltering hot afternoon, a little more older and a little less wiser. We all dozed in the car while John drove on, still awake and crazier than ever,

the  
Pilot  
and  
the  
Panda

his only words being the occasional, “Oh *man* does my stomach feel *weird!*”

Somehow we made it home alive.

Erik  
Bader

the  
Pilot  
and  
the  
Panda

Erik  
Bader