"Who's there?"

He saw her silhouette through the screen door, only her nightgown moving in a rectangle of light. The material drifted about her, a flimsy shield for her breasts, her belly full with pregnancy.

"I've had an accident," he said, as he walked up the yard. The grass was soft on tired feet encased in steel-toed work boots. Even in this light, he could see the paint that had begun to peel away from the posts and railing. Grey wood showed through.

The hinges of the screen door gave a single squeak. As she opened the door, light from inside spread across the floor of the porch in a triangle.

"Albert, is that you?" She hesitated at the doorway, then stepped onto the porch. "Are you all right?"

"I hurt my hand," he said, as his work boots clumped mud and small stones up the three wooden steps.

"Let me have a look at it." She let the handle of the door slip from her fingertips. The grey wood gave a hollow slam. He covered his arms tighter. Her fingers knitted between his hands. "Let me see."

His hand was greasy and the jagged wounds were filled in with dried blood. There were blood stains on the forearms of his flannel shirt. As she moved close to him, her swollen belly pressed into his belt buckle.

"Sit down. I'll go get a wet towel."

Albert turned around and stripped off his shirt. He hissed as he pulled the cotton material away from the wound. There was a tearing sound as the sleeve pulled away from the dried blood that held it in place.

He could hear her fill the pail with water, the metal ringing as a stream of cold water splashed in. There was the sound of doors and cupboards opening and slamming closed. She returned with the bucket and a wadded T-shirt.

She took his arm and dabbed twice above the wound before touching it with the rag.

"Where's the car?" she asked as she wrung out the rag. The water filled with streams of red as it slowly diffused.

"In a ditch. Oww! Watch it!"

"I'm sorry. I'll try to be more careful." She rinsed out the rag again and cleaned more of the wound. She picked up a box of band-aids and opened the metal top. She stripped off the plastic protector and spread the band-aid out. Her hands hovered over the wound, steering the strip in different directions.

"This isn't any good--there's no place to put the stickum part."

She stood up and walked into the house. The door gave another slam. He stared out into the darkness. The blue-white light that hung from the front of the house spread a glow out to the road. He looked past the light into the impenetrable darkness that started somewhere in the field on the other side of the pavement.

She returned to the porch with a red, white, and blue pouch and opened it up.

"There's some gauze in this first-aid kit. We bought it from that high school group that was trying to raise money for its sports things." Tearing open the box, she said, "I hope there's enough." She began to wind the cloth around his wrist.

"Watch out!" he shouted and pulled the arm closer to his chest.

"Oh, you're a big boy. It doesn't hurt that much."

"How the hell do you know how it hurts?"

She stopped winding and let the roll of gauze fall into the corner. "Oh, think of it."

"I've got to go to the hospital? I can call your mother," she said.

"No. I'm sorry."

She picked up the roll and orbited his arm with it, covering with loose loops. As the gauze touched his skin, his arm shook.

"Come on inside."

He stood and followed her up the steps. She held the door for him, but went in first. They walked through the darkened living room.

"I saved dinner for you," she said as she walked. "Are you hungry?"

"Yes."

They walked into the kitchen; he slid the chair out and sat down. She went to the oven door and opened it. Stoooping over, she pulled out a plate covered with a tepee of aluminum foil.

"I'm sure you're hungry. And you might as well eat, otherwise we'll have leftovers." She set the plate in front of him and flanked it with a knife and fork. She lifted the foil off the plate.

"It was better a couple of hours ago."

The plate held a single patty of ground beef. There were bubbles of grease on the surface and mottled streaks of ketchup. One corner of the patty was cut away.

"I got hungry waiting for you, so I ate a little off the corner." She sat down at the table across from him.

He held the fork in his left hand and cut the meat with the side of the fork. The flower pattern in the plate was revealed as he lifted the square of meat.

"How bad is the car?" she asked.

"Pretty bad," he said between chews.

"What happened?"

He swallowed, cut off another piece of meat and lifted it to his mouth.

"I was driving home; I hit a chuck hole, something
broke, and then I went into the ditch."

"Do you know what broke?"

"Look," he shouted, "I hit a hole and then I was in a ditch. That’s all I know." He stabbed the piece of meat, ate, and threw his fork onto the plate. They sat in silence for a while.

"Do you think it can be fixed?"

"I don’t think so."

Her chair scraped across the linoleum floor as she pushed it back. She took his plate to the sink and stood by the counter. She stared out the window.

"We need a car. I don’t know where we’re going to get the money."

"Stop talking to me about money!"

"Don’t yell."

"Well, I don’t know how we’re going to get it!" He shoved himself back against the wall.

"A year ago I saved money every week. Every week!" she pounded the side of the sink with her fist, "I put something away. Now that’s all gone and I don’t know where we’re going to get more."

"A year ago you weren’t . . . ." He stopped as he saw her hold a breath and stiffen. "I mean a year ago you were working, too." She kept her back to him, taking long deep breaths.

"Lisa, I didn’t mean anything by it. I know this was unexpected, but . . . ." Her breath rasped. He looked up from his chest. "Lisa . . . Lisa?"

He hurried behind her and put his hand on her shoulder. Her knuckles were white as she held onto the sink. They stood there for a moment; the only light was the bulb above them in the kitchen. Outside, he could see the garage light. As she relaxed, he dropped his hand.

"Are you okay?"

She nodded and swallowed. "Yes," she said, stumbling backwards. "Let me go lay down."

He wrapped his left arm around her and she held onto his shirt. She tottered and weaved slightly as she walked, keeping one hand on her abdomen.

"I was . . . cleaning in the bedroom today. I got it all fixed up to show you when you got home. I waited and waited, but you didn’t show up."

"I’ll look at it now."

He didn’t turn on the living room light as they walked through the archway. He could hear her slippers slide along the wooden floor. He didn’t turn on the bedroom light either, but led her straight to the bed.

"Now, just rest."

Against the wall was a crib. The wooden bars were fiat grey lines in the darkness, but he could see them. Next to the crib was a cardboard box with strong rectangular shapes poking out of the top. He walked to the box and pulled out one of the paintings. He tilted the painting so that the dim light from the kitchen fell on the surface.

It was a rolling field, crisp and clear with white clouds billowing in the sky. Over one hill, there was a rainfall. In the bottom corner of the canvas was the name, "Albert Faulks."

"What were you going to do with my art supplies?" he asked.

"Huh? What art supplies?"

"The things I did in high school."

"Oh, I was going to put them out in the garage," she said.

"But they’ll get ruined out there."

"I didn’t think you would mind."

"Well, I mind," he said.

"What would you suggest we do with them? They’re not very good."

He stopped and mumbled something under his breath.

"What did you say?"

"I said, ‘How would you know? You only did one thing in your life and I helped.’" He carried the painting out of the room, walked through the living room and into the lighted kitchen. He looked at the painting once again; he looked at the colors. He placed the painting on the kitchen table and walked out the back screen door.

He looked at the long back yard from the top of the three steps that formed the back porch. The blue-white light cast a glow on the empty fields behind the house. He tried to reach into his shirt pocket with his right hand. The pain reminded him of the wound. He put his arm down and reached into his shirt with his left hand. He pulled out a pack of cigarettes.

He pulled a cigarette from the pack with his lips, then lifted the lighter to the end. As he lit the cigarette, he noticed that even his left hand was cracked and bleeding. It was from the cardboard boxes at the factory. He walked around the side of the house.

There, three rows of two-by-fours joined the back of the house where the siding was pulled away, exposing black paper. He stepped into the frame and looked out from between the posts. In this light, the two-by-fours that formed the baby’s room looked grey. He rested his arm on the brace by the window and looked out. He leaned there, staring out across the darkened fields and finished his cigarette. Then he walked out of the addition and urinated on the foundation of the house. He took a deep breath, then re-zipped his fly. He heard the back door open.

"Albert? Are you out here?" He walked around the corner of the building. He walked to the three steps and sat down. She stood behind him; he could feel her toes in his back.

"I was driving home," he said, "and I hit this hole. I heard something snap; I thought it was in the back, but it must have been in the front ’cause I couldn’t steer. And I hit the guardrail. The car flipped over and landed in a ditch.

"I was upside down; everything was upside down, and I got my feet caught in the steering wheel. I tried to open the door, but it was stuck. So I tried the other door. It was stuck, too. I tried cranking down the windows, but the car rolled and must have jammed up the mechanism. I couldn’t get out."
"And then I thought that the gas tank was on fire."

"I screamed and started to punch the window; I punched and punched and yelled, 'God, let me out. I'll do anything!' And I broke the window and got out. I ran up the side of the ditch and got to the top. The car just laid there. It didn't blow up at all."

"Albert." She sat down beside him.

"I think I broke my hand." He took out another cigarette and flicked out his lighter with one hand.

"Do you want me to call your brother?"

"Yeah."

She looked at him. "I don't understand. First you tell me that you don't want to die, then you smoke. Think of the baby, Albert. Those things will kill you."

"Yeah, I know."