

# Blues Machine

*by* Bill Roorbach

Rockin' Joe Heath stumbled into the stairwell in nothing but a black Zildjian t-shirt, shushing himself, trying to see right, pounding head. He recalled the old lily pattern of the wallpaper and something about the tattered edges of the carpet over the stairs, but he couldn't remember any act of climbing those stairs or what must have ensued. Connie was dead asleep, a good damn thing. Joe gently closed her door, crept down the hall, tried the next door sure he'd see tile and toilet but no, it was stuffed animals and a rumped single bed.

Oh, Christ, her kids, and Joe with no pants.

Quick. End of the hall, creaking floor, top of the stairs, two more doors, the first a closet (empty shelves except for unmatched washcloths, neatly folded), the next, yes, good, the bath. Mermaid shower curtain. Smell of soap and kid piss. He tripped in, shut the door, addressed the toilet gratefully, yanked a handful of pink toilet paper when he was done, wiped the seat, perfect gentleman. But the toilet would not flush. Rockin' Joe wriggled the handle and rattled it, but the water wasn't going to come.

Medicine cabinet. Squeal of hinges. Plenty prescriptions. One box hair color, "Confident Blonde." Midol. Ointments, pads, puffs, lipsticks, toothbrushes, Q-tips, every stinking thing but aspirin. So Midol, and close the small door quick as the other shit fell out, long mess of his own blackened hair in the mirror, and his new-trimmed beard, salt and pepper and rocks and mud, Joe tall, mirror low, so nothing of himself above the nose, good thing—didn't want to look in those eyes. He smiled through his mustache to see his pretty teeth (Connie said).

Four Midol in the mouth, down the hatch, but the sink was out, no water. He gagged on the pills, pushed past the door, bounded down the stairs, Midol stuck. Big foyer, old farmhouse, huge living room (bare), dining room (long, elegant, heirloom table), kitchen.

Sink. No stinking water. Joe coughed, the bitter taste of the pills filling his throat and his mouth and his nose. He hopped to the round old refrigerator, whipped the door open slam into the rustic sideboard, rattle of jars, plastic pitcher full of pink stuff, Kool-aid, drank deeply, sickly sweet.

Clock over the sink: 4:30. Saturday afternoon. Nice going, Rockin' Joe.

"Hi," someone said brightly.

Joe spun around and saw this teenager seated at the raw kitchen table in front of the ornate cookstove.

"Ah, shit, scared me, boy!" He pulled his T-shirt down, snagged the kitchen towel hung sinkside. He covered himself, red and white checks, wished he hadn't cursed.

John Wayne voice: "There's a *real towel* in the bathroom there." The boy pointed, grinning. He was maybe fifteen, a small man, sitting stiffly upright, facing Joe squarely with his hands on the table on either side of a fat paperback book. His hair was short and dark, stiffly parted, damp with styling gel. His big dark eyes were steady and ironic, nose large, faintest ghost of a mustache, front teeth big and white in sidelong grin. He looked like his father. He looked like Tony, all right.

Joe sidled to the big bathroom, old tub in there, found a flowered beach towel and wrapped himself, long skirt. He stood tall to find some dignity coming out, said as conversationally as possible, "No water?"

"No water?" the boy growled, imitating him. "Nup! No water. There's something a little bit wrong with the *pump* again. Carl Andresen was supposed to come out yesterday to fix it, but the thing is, we forgot to pay him last time, so, well, the thing is, I don't think he's going to show up, do you?"

Long silence.

Joe said, "Got a piece of bread or something? That Kool-aid . . ."

"Look in the breadbox. We got no Irish or Scottish, but we might have *English* muffins, but then, there's no gas, so you can't cook 'em."

"Where's the toaster?"

"Ha, ha, toaster! The toaster is toasted. And I don't feel like making a fire. You'll have to eat it, you know, kind of *raw*."

Joe found the English muffins in the genuinely gorgeous bread box as the kid piped on: "I made that box—well, not really—my father and me made that box, it's *rosewood*, that's why it's so *groovy*, like the neck of a really good guitar. You're a musician?"

"That's right."

"And you're hungover as *anything*?" He leaned forward, with a direct and eager gaze.

"That, I'm afraid, is right."

"And you snorfed a lot of strange powders last night?"

"No, kid, I did not."

"Oh, whoa! 'Kid.' *I'm cool! Say no to drugs, kid.*" The boy broke into hilarious laughter, fully aware of his power to irritate. He turned his book over, *Dune*, and stared intently at Joe. "And you slept with Connie, right? Cuz I heard you."

Slowly: "Ah, hey, I'm sorry, man."

"You know how I knew you were a *musician*?"

Politely: "You want to chill out a little?"

The boy lowered his voice to an extravagant whisper. "Cuz Connie only likes to boink musicians. Once a month. You're right on schedule. You're in the Rockin' Joe Heath band?"

Humbly: "I *am* Rockin' Joe Heath."

"Oh! Well! Aren't you *special*." Some tag line from a TV show. "*Bing!* She got the leader this time! How'd you like her?" The boy whooped loud as hell. "Is she pretty *sassy*?"

Joe remembered a quick scene from the night, something on the staircase, the inseams of Connie's bluejeans where they joined, her laughter. "Cut it out," he said. "I know she's your mom. You're Jesse, right? I used to play with your father back in the Blues Machine days. I knew you when you were a stinking peanut."

Mock fan, head bobbing in pretend sympathy, fingers under chin: "How come you're not famous anymore, Rockin'?"

Joe shrugged, opened the refrigerator again, looked in. Nothing to drink. He shut the door softly, turned to face the boy: "I'm sorry about your dad."

Comically solemn face: "Say-no-to-drugs."

Joe bit into the dusty English muffin, took a swig of the red bug juice. Four years since Anthony "Gui-tar" DeAngelis died. Connie said last night she still can't listen to a Neil Young record, since Neil Young was headliner on the tour, and nothing of Tony's and certainly none of the Blues Machine albums. Not even the radio, just in case. The thought of Paris makes her nervous, or furious, or ill.

Rockin' Joe coughed. His hangover made everything seem particular, segmented, unflowing. The kid's weird teasing and clowning brought nothing but sorrow, a flood from the past: lost auditoriums, band fights, airports, bus trips, lights in the face and high as hell always. The kid continued to stare, making comical faces in imitation of Joe's chewing.

Just like Tony: always goofing.

Joe felt himself flush like he hadn't ever. He said, "Your mom and I have been friends a long, long time," and took another swig of the bug juice.

"She looks beautiful, huh? She's only thirty-four."

"Beautiful." Joe turned away.

The kid turned serious: "It's all right. She's my mom, but she's also like my best friend or my roommate or something." He flipped *Dune* over and pretended to read, then looked up. "Did you ever read this book? It's *awesome*. You ought to hang around today, stay for dinner and all. I mean, it's Saturday, right? And watch a movie on the VCR, we got plenty of movies, and the electricity is on for sure."

"I got to get back to New York."

"This *is* New York, you big nack-nack, the nice part of New York. And you don't have a car, anyway, I couldn't help but notice."

Rockin' Joe laughed. The boy was like a comedian, rapid delivery, raised eyebrows, drumming on the table to accent his punch lines: "We've got four hundred acres. Go get dressed and I'll take you for

a walk, all right? But don't expect much. It's kind of a mess since summer. I mean, I've got to go to school, don't I? We sold all the cows, but there's still the llama you could see. And we got pumpkins! Don't worry. It's a weekend. Mom'll sleep till it's dark."

"Has she been all right? Where are the girls? I hear you've got sisters, now."

"Who? Maggot and Hairball? Granma D's got 'em in Ithaca for the weekend, so Mom can have some fun." Bap de bap on the table. A mighty whoop. "Fun. That's you."

Joe turned and looked out the window over the sink. The glass was old, bubbled and ridged, and it made the long field of corn stubble out there stretch and jump as he rocked his head. Connie must rent the fields to farmers. At the end of the near pasture was a hedgerow of mature maples filled with dead branches, red at their tops, yellow halfway, deep green toward the ground, flamingly bright in clear sun. Joe wagged the single handle of the sink faucet. "No stinking water," he muttered. "No stinking shower."

"You'll stinking live. You're Stinkin' Joe Heath!"

There was something so comic about this kid, the way he flipped his hands around, the parody of Joe's hungover mug, that Joe laughed with him, now, laughed harder and harder, deep snorts of laughter, the kid not exactly laughing along but imitating Joe's laughter: hiccups of laughter, bent-double laughter.

Suddenly Joe choked and gagged, burped, coughed. Mortifyingly, a little acid-pink Kool-aid splashed on the floor. Joe froze, afraid of more. His towel dropped around his bare feet.

"Oh, man! You are *disgusting*," Jesse said. He flipped *Dune* back over and began to read.

Joe retrieved his towel only slowly, wiped his mouth with it and dropped it over the small red puddle he had made. "It's that stinking bug juice."

Jesse did not look up. He said, "Yeah, right. Like you didn't drink four quarts of Jack Daniels last night. I mean, how old are you, anyway?"

Joe turned to the sink, rattled the faucet handle with small violence. “No fucking water,” he growled. The taste in his mouth—*hell*.

“You need a bath,” Jesse said, so tenderly. Catching himself, he raised his eyebrows—Groucho Marx—did another drum roll on the table. “Why don't you go get your pants? I mean. I'll take you down to the pond. You could swim.”

“Jesus, boy,” Joe said, meaning, Let's not wake up your mom. If he saw Connie again, he might never leave.

Jesse said, “Okay. Just hang out. I'll get your pants for you.” He sprang up and darted out of the room before Joe could protest, pounded up the stairs.

Three kids, farm and home. That would be the end of Rockin' Joe. Connie, Connie, Connie. He remembered her, suddenly, in the Blues Machine reunion crowd at The Rongo last night, big surprise that she would show up at all, diffident and streaky blond at the side of the raging dance floor, big complicated eyes, her cheeks pink from uncharacteristic drinking. Okay, no surprise, though on the phone she'd said Forget it, Joe, forget it. Said she would not be in town. Said she had no taste for crowds. Said she had no wish for music, and not the Blues Machine, not that. Forget it, forget it, forget it. But there in the crowd she held this slight smile, and you would have thought nothing bad had ever happened to her, the peaceful way she bobbed her head, just the slightest amount, to the loud music. Rockin' Joe, he'd sung two ballads to her from the stage, not really kidding, then looked for her in the crush, first break. She was hanging out up by the bar with a couple of local bikers—serious guys—talking intently, her hand on a hairy forearm and cobra tattoo, listening intently, as well. She knew the tender side of everybody. Joe got the message, didn't approach. The little place was packed. Years since the Blues Machine had played together, more since they'd played someplace so small, more yet since they'd played here, those early days, Tony DeAngelis still in *college*. Next set, Joe sang every song to Connie, and then in the break they got to talk out on the fire escape over the creek where

once they'd all done dope with Tony. You name it. You stinking name it. Talk: Connie was back teaching ceramics at TC3, that earnest little Tompkins County Community College. She still thought Joe should shave his beard, to show his chin again. She had new lines at her eyes that suddenly were the most beautiful thing about her. Joe was smitten all over, listening: her studio, in a storefront right on the main street of Trumansburg, was going strong, had become a hang-out for what amounted to the arts scene and the women's movement in the little town. There was no profit in the place, but Connie would never give it up. She had her wheels in there, and her slab roller and two gas kilns. She'd bought an ornate little wood stove for the gallery she kept open in the front of the place, where her pals put their feet up like farmers and drank coffee and talked whole days away, where nothing ever sold. Her kids were fine, she said. Joe asked for a kiss, actually asked for a kiss before he went back on, but she wouldn't quite let him, didn't quite not, either, gave him her cheek. All that was over, she said into his neck. Rockin' Joe called a lot of ballads in the last set, sang them for her alone, like no one else was in the room, no old fans, no young women, no couples dancing slow. He was as in love with Connie as ever. And despite the crowded room and the music all around him, Old Wally's sweet sax, Angel's deep bass, the Wonder Women singing backup, The Blues Machine was dead.

The boy pounded down the steps, spun into the kitchen, flung Joe's pants in his face. "She's out like a tree stump," he said. "You must have spronked her really, really well."

"I told you to chill on that stuff." Joe pulled his pants on and followed Jesse out the back door, shoeless. The sun was hot through the cool air, perfect September evening. Time for school to begin, new starts of all kinds. The sky was clear as the kind of drunk in which Joe would stare at something hard and seem to see it through a perfect tunnel of understanding. Time to quit all that. He stood and breathed, felt better, looking around: leaves already falling, dervish whirls in gusty breezes, grass too high on what should have been a lawn. A sweeping spruce tree rose sixty feet perfect cone in

front of the house, swaying with that breeze, creaking with it by the gravel road. The melancholy perfection of the place overcame Joe: cry for Tony! Cry for Connie! Cry for maybe everyone on this sad planet, where people come and go and only live so long. Cry and then hit the road, Joe thought. Back to New York. He'd better get his ass down to the club, he best. The show was over, it was done.

"The pond's back here," Jesse called. "There's no llama, though. I was l-lying." He started off, but Joe stood transfixed by a hose coiled sloppily on the side of the two-kiln garage.

"I got to get some kind of a drink here." He put the nozzle to his lips, held the hose up high. A slight wash of warm, hose-flavored water fell into his mouth: not horrible. He swished and spat, held up another coil, another meager drink. Jesse helped him then, pulling the hose free and holding up coils. Not enough to wash up, but enough to get rid of the rotten taste of old Kool-aid in his mouth.

"Let's *boogie*," Jesse said, savoring the prehistoric phrase, something his old man would have said. He led Joe over potsherds and broken fire bricks and several bent Barbie dolls to an old cart path that ran between two stone walls and two noble and gnarled rows of old maples, path and walls and trees separating two good fields. Connie had propped fractured and under-fired vases and pitchers against the tree trunks and along the tops of the rocks, colorful and meaningful in the lowering day. The cart path needed clearing; saplings had begun to choke it, threatened the older trees. Plenty work here.

"Now these are sugar maples," said Rockin' Joe Heath. "You can take the sap and make syrup and candy and stuff."

"My father used to say that, too, but he never did it."

"You boil it down, and boil it down."

Seriously: "How old are you?"

"I'm forty-three. How old are you?"

"Oh, fifteen, and that's the thing. I'm going to college before too long, you know? I'm going to want to get out of here." He looked at Joe significantly, then marched ahead. He stopped. "You play



guitar? Or what?" He was back into his comedy routine, wiggling his arms, dancing ahead in the leaves, making faces.

Joe laughed. "I'm a singer, and you stinking know it."

"I play guitar, but I like to write, too, and draw. And you stinking know it!"

"You ought to think about being a comedian or an actor or something."

"Well, I've certainly got the looks for it!" Jesse tweaked his own cheeks, then ran ahead, darted through an opening in the wall and disappeared.

Joe shuffled behind him, carefully barefoot in the leaves, not quite warm enough, that hangover sweeping back in. The trees beside the cart path formed a tunnel that stretched straight ahead to a view of the sky over the top of a distant ridge. He remembered laughing in a car, in a back seat. Gator's car, it was, the new goddamn guitarist. Connie was funny. Right. Connie was really funny, made everyone laugh when she wanted to, laughing straight up the long hill to the house. This was supposed to have been just a ride home for her, but Wally and Gator had pushed Rockin' Joe out behind her in her driveway and peeled-out, that old trick, like they were kids. And Joe thought he'd better thank the boys, except the one thing: now he was stuck.

He and Connie had laughed it up in the driveway, ending up kissing like old times sitting on the back stoop under starlight, half-frozen. And it wasn't like they had never made love before, or like they weren't in love still. She must have been just as drunk as he was. In the house he'd played the piano and sung with her, and they had kissed on the bench and had a regular riot, and the bench fell over and they lay on the floor—right—no wonder the kid woke up. Joe felt rotten thinking of Jesse having to hear them. He remembered the pink dawn that was in all the windows when he and Connie finally got off the staircase and into her room. They never even took their shirts off. Right. She didn't want her shirt off. Joe shuffled down the cart path in the leaves, the night coming clear in his mind, and older times too, the gigs at the Jersey Shore, Connie's

new baby and her obsessive concern about appearing in her bikini—stretch marks—that would be 15 years past. He remembered her before Jesse, too, and before Tony, remembered her at that first blues festival in Vermont. Then, unbidden thought, he remembered what the older musicians seemed like back then, bald guys trying to act like kids, trying to impress the kids, and only the other old bald guys liked them, and some of the girls of course. The best of the girls, come to think of it. Joe shook his head and shuffled in the leaves. Christ if he hadn't just colored his graying hair with black, black rinse.

At the break in the wall a lesser trail led downhill through long grass and brambles a couple hundred yards to the rippling pond, Jesse's path through the fallen leaves plain enough. And there Jesse was, still goofily running, flailing his arms like a much younger kid, windmilling his arms and whooping his way to a wooden dock that had long since rotted and fallen into the water. A skin of bubbling, vile algae on the pond's surface stretched out from the little beach that someone had made by clearing reeds and spreading sand. The only clear water was on the other side, no way to get to it through the reedy swamp that formed most of the pond's shore. "Looks like I'm not going to get to swim," Joe said.

"I'll give you twenty bucks if you go in."

"Keep it. We didn't even bring a towel."

"All right, then. I'll give you twenty bucks if you fix the pump." Jesse pointed to a tall doghouse of a building. "Unless it just needs to be primed. That's what Carl always does. Then I'll only give you a quarter. Oh. And we lost the key."

"Well, I can prime a pump all right."

After a long and silent gaze at the pond and at the trees and the hills and the streaky sky, Jesse watching him, Joe pushed his way through brambles to study the sturdy little pump house, built over what looked to be a hand-dug artesian well. The door was absurdly padlocked. Jesse ran up beside him, stood too close, a comic examination of the lock.

Joe said, "We can just clobber it till it pops, easy enough. Could you maybe run and go get a couple of tools? Crescent wrench and a hammer? And some kind of bucket ? And a screwdriver. And maybe pliers?"

Jesse made a loopy face of pretend concentration, rushed suddenly backwards through the brambles, then backwards up the path, looking intently at Joe, full-speed amazing backwards. Joe smiled, gave Jesse his laughter, pointed at him and laughed hard for him, laughed till the boy twirled twice at the stone wall and sprinted toward the house.

Beautiful, beautiful land here. Joe held the padlock bright and cold in his hand, studied it for several long minutes, whiskey-induced particularity of vision, grew dizzy. Dizzy, dizzy, too much fun. He dropped the lock and stretched his arms to hold the little pump house, lay his bearded cheek on the rough warm shingles of its roof. His head swam. He was a fool, a waste, a has-been, a nothing, a drunk, a clown, Grecian Formula, fuck. He hadn't been this sick from drinking for years. What was he thinking? What could he ever do for Connie? Up all night, the two of them, like twenty-five. Tequila *after* whiskey. And where did that big bag of oranges come from? He was someone Connie loved. She said so, at least that. He saw her over him, still wearing her black Harley Davidson t-shirt, her hair falling blond into his face, leaving a tunnel in the dawn to her dark eyes. It was those dark eyes with the blond hair that made her so lovely to him, he thought. It was those dark eyes with the blond hair and the subtle laugh and the careful analytic conversation and her ability to feel and offer joy, and that undertow of honest sorrow. And for that many hours he'd felt something different than this darkness he walked around with, not even knowing he walked with it till now. Connie had done that for him in the past, too. But this kid Jesse. And Maggie and Harriet, little girls he had never met. Quite a package, Tony's legacy. Joe held the pump house tighter to prop himself, twitched a couple of times and fell asleep.

He woke when his grip loosened and his face slid down the little roof, the shingle stones pulling at his beard, woke with a violent start, released his hug on the house.

Jesse handed him tools. "Here's the hammer. Didn't want to wake you. Mom's still in z-land too; you set the record, Rockin' Joe Heath!" He dropped the other tools, beat his thin chest, yodeled like Tarzan.

Annoyed: "Chill, man." Joe wasted no time, swung the hammer, tapped the padlock precisely. It sprang open. Jesse clapped his hands and hissed breathily to imitate big-auditorium applause, very convincing. Joe grinned despite himself at this teasing, at first hiding it, but then he looked up to give the grin to Jesse. He felt gauzy but remarkably better after his tiny upright nap.

The pump house door fell open. Joe reached inside past spider webs to snap the perfectly modern breaker bar in there and cut the electricity to the ungodly ancient motor. He stared at the piping, at the electric heater, at the old iron wheel and belt of the pump. "This is an incredibly stupid set-up," he said.

"That's what Carl says."

"I mean, check it out. Why not sink a pump in the goddamn well? And they got to have a heater in here, for Christ's sake. What happens to this thing in the winter? Hand me a wrench."

Jesse patted Joe's palm with the big old adjustable wrench twice, took it back twice, ha ha. He said, "My father built this whole thing. And he dug the well his self, too, the whole thing. And restored the pond, which was just a mudhole then."

"It's not so bad." Joe poked around the base of the pump in the dark, unscrewed a bolt, re-tightened it, tried another. There was no room to reach in, really, and the door ledge pressed on his chest painfully. He said, "Oh, it's not so bad at all," knocking his knuckles against the greasy metal of the pump motor. "And the stone work down below here looks awfully nice. Must have been quite a project. Your old dad was more a mason than a plumber, maybe."

"I helped him, at least a little. I was four?"

"Four," Joe said. "We're messing with first memories here!"

Long silence, Joe feeling his way along the base of the pump.

In some kind of robot voice Jesse said, "My first memory, if you want to know, is actually the *band*, Joe, you guys really, really loud on a stage outside somewhere with Hell's Angels and a big giant crowd dancing and me on Mommy's shoulders and *I didn't like it.*"

That last delivered like another punch line, but not at all funny, not one bit. Joe kept probing, and at last, in the most inaccessible spot possible, back edge of the old pump body, his fingers found the priming port. Fighting the wrench in there, slipping off the nut repeatedly, grunting, stretching his arms, pulling then pushing that wrench in no room at all, he finally managed to loosen the threaded plug, back it out, and not drop it or the wrench. He stuck his pinky in the port to be sure he had it right.

"Now we need some water," he said, extricating himself.

Jesse had brought the Kool-aid pitcher and not a bucket—good enough—raced to the pond to fill it. Joe poured that water into the little threaded opening, slowly, six pitchers full, Jesse a whirlwind getting more. Finally, the port gurgled and overflowed. Joe screwed the threaded plug back in (not too tight—someone would be doing this again soon), pulled his beard, twice, hoping he'd done the priming right, then hit the breaker. The old pump jumped to life. The trickle pipe that fed the pond began to drip, then to flow, lightly.

"Showers!" said Joe, exultant. His feet were freezing.

"Cold showers," Jesse told him, seriously. "No gas. Mom did a firing Wednesday and used up the tank. End of savings! Doom and destruction!"

Walking back to the house in the shuffling leaves, Jesse kept pace with Joe, no clowning. The sun wasn't far from setting, long shadows, wind now, and cold.

Jesse said it again: "How come you're not famous anymore?"

Joe pushed his collar up. He said, "I do all right."

Jesse pushed on: "But I never hear of you at all anymore. I mean, you're still on the road. You're still playing at little bars. I thought you old guys kicked back and wrote songs or something."

"I thought so, too, Chief."

Silence.

"And wait a minute—I do write songs. Lots and lots of songs. They're on the stinking radio."

"Mom always says how he shouldn't have fired you. She told Carter and Betty the other night all about it, cuz they said you were coming back for the reunion."

"Your mom likes me, Jess." Laughing in the window seat, her room, some kind of extended trouble with buttons, serious dark eyes suddenly—kissing again.

"She thinks you're *so* handsome," the boy said imitating her inflections perfectly. He tried to keep clowning, but this was serious: "I was just kidding about the musician every month, Rockin' Joe. And I knew you were you. Also, she's thirty-eight."

"I know how old she is."

"Were you ever married or anything?"

Joe laughed. "Who would marry me?" He looked at Jesse, saw how the boy's jaw rose strongly back to his ear like Connie's.

"Are you the one she used to visit in New York?"

Joe shrugged, embarrassed: "Maybe so."

"Just maybe every weekend for a year."

"Your dad was gone, Jess."

They stopped walking. There was the house, right there, that big old spruce tree. A new shot of wind came, hard chill, bearing leaves from the maples, flapping Jesse's big shirt sleeves. Joe's bare feet all of a sudden were bricks of ice, prickly, fucked.

Jesse said, "There's never time to get things done around here. I mean I'm in school, and I'm a teenager, I'm not going to do much, am I? What's more useless than a teenager? There's a ton of insurance money someplace, if you think that's the problem. It's *invested*. And you know what? My dad grew thirty thousand dollars worth of pot here one year."

Joe raised a doubtful eyebrow, fought the old bad feeling. He knew the band bus had left with the equipment, knew no one had thought or cared to come get him. His fading Jaguar was on the

street in Trumansburg, safe enough. "I got to get out of here," he said. "I really do."

"Well, you're going to have to walk. Granma D's got the car."

"With the little girls."

Teen irony, full force: "That's right, Rockin'!"

"So what's on the VCR tonight?" Joe said, picking up the joke. He could walk to Hall's Corners, hitch from there.

Jesse, suddenly sincere: "Actually, I lied. We don't have a VCR. We don't even have a TV. Sorry. But we got stuff to make *lasagna*, we really do, and Mom's got a jug of wine, okay? I'll read to you from *Dune* or something. And make a huge fire."

Joe got a picture of Connie much younger, not so different from now, Connie nineteen at her wheel throwing these perfect pots, one after the next, turning them, shaping them while he watched, amazed. Just that, a picture from the past.

"I got to get back to New York," Joe said finally. "Thanks, though." He could still split before Connie woke—poor Connie, never a great partier, way out of practice—and that would be that, the perfect goodbye.

Joe patted Jesse's back a couple of times, then back to the house in a hurry, frozen feet.

Jesse raced to gather a huge pile of sticks from the lawn, brought them in by the stove, rushed out to load himself with logs from the tumbled woodpile. Joe held the screen door for him, didn't let it slam, danced a little on the cold tile floor as he entered the kitchen. He wanted his socks and shoes—time to hike on out of here—but he didn't want to wake Connie and the shoes were in her room. He made a few false starts toward the stairs. Forget it.

Abruptly, he remembered his pump project, went to the sink. The faucet sputtered and coughed and bubbled, spat some rusty sludge, ran rusty two minutes then muddy two more then clear, good cold water, flowing well, time a-wasting. And once again Joe grinned despite himself, pleased as hell with his success, watched the water, put his hands in it, drank, washed his face, dunked, lifted his

dripping head, saw out the window when he opened his eyes that the dusk had begun to descend, pink as the dawn.

Jesse banged around at the old wood stove, building his fire noisily as possible. Joe thought how you might just sit down there at the table, put your feet up close to the stove. Jesse's flames leapt up out of the cook rings. The boy knew what he was doing. Joe's feet—two stinking ice bricks. To walk would warm them. Hustle down the hill to Halls Corners, put out his thumb. He leaned back on the sink as if relaxed, said, "Hey, maybe you could get my shoes and socks for me upstairs there Jess, what d'ya think?"

"Okay. But maybe you want to take a bath before you go."

"Can't."

Jesse, entreating: "Take a bath before you go." No kidding around, now. "I'll heat some water here. You can take a nice hot bath. You're shivering anyway." He looked to the ceiling, looked to Joe, began again to clown, noisily as hell searched the cabinets to find his mom's gargantuan canning kettle, then two large buckets and two smaller pots, bumping them into everything, clang and bang to fill them at the sink then splash to the stove, pushing Joe out of the way, one vessel at a time, big groan heaving each to its circle of fire in the blackened cooktop. The ritual did not seem new to Jesse. He put more wood in the fire, which was already raging.

Rockin' Joe Heath stepped through Jesse's puddles to the table and sat, put his feet up on a chair, let them burn in the heat. He picked up *Dune* and read from Jesse's place in it, waiting. Giant worms, strange planet. Another hour wouldn't matter. And Jesse wasn't going for any shoes. The stove was hot, the boy quiet.

Quickly, the water in the smaller pots began to steam, then to bubble and boil. Soon after that—big fire—the buckets too. The water in the big canning kettle took longer, never quite boiled, but rolled a little, and steamed. Joe pretended to read, even turned pages, saw himself starting the Jag in T-burg, New York City a long drive, five hours.

Jesse made four fast trips across the nicely overheated kitchen, splashing into the bathroom to fill the claw-foot tub, avoiding the hot



spills. Joe heard him adding cold water from the tap. “Your bath,” Jesse announced. He had folded a towel over his arm and bowed like a small, worried butler.

Joe stood and undressed where he was, old hippie, leaving his clothes in a simple pile on the kitchen floor. He walked naked past Jesse into the big bathroom—lots of hand-done tile work—slipped into the tub, sighed, lay back. The boy had surely got the temperature right. Jesse smiled happily, watching Joe, clanged the canner and the buckets and pots back for more water, more fire. Joe heard the clank of the firebox door: get that thing roaring. And about when the bath was going chilly, Jesse re-appeared, bearing buckets. Joe closed his eyes and let the expert boy pour the water over him. Jess went back for the smaller pots, poured those.

“Save that big one for yourself,” Joe said.

Jess banged off with the buckets and pots, filled them at the sink, put them on the stove, panting with the effort of carrying so much water, no clowning.

Joe stood when the water went cold again, stood wrinkled and wasted, took himself a quick cold shower, drained the tub, rinsed it for the boy.

He called, “Get ready, Jess,” wrapped himself in a worn Barbie beach towel. Jesse undressed quickly, demure, as Joe stepped dripping into the hot kitchen to fetch the boiling new batches of water one vessel at a time. And Joe filled the tub, adjusted the temperature with the very cold water from the well Jesse's dad had dug. Jesse, child again, poured Mr. Bubble and climbed into the tub in his underpants. He splashed and goofed while Joe in his swinging towel filled pots, brought them to the stove.

And Rockin' Joe stoked the fire, turned the pots, breathed in steam, stood in warm puddles tending his chore, the kitchen a sauna. When the smallest pots were hot enough—not long—he carried them to the bath, poured the water over Jesse, two buckets next, huge kettle last, a very long bath. Jesse splashed and sang and dunked himself, blew bubbles, splashed and sang.

Joe kept moving, clang and bong of the pots, put more water on—let the kid soak all night!—stoked the fire even more, sat down in the great heat at the table and opened *Dune*, read a little, thinking lasagna didn't sound half bad, thinking how in one of these pots here he'd boil the noodles shortly, layer 'em up in cheese and sauce, let the fire burn down for baking, glass of wine. He stood twice to check the water. The third time he rose, he heard Connie coming down the stairs. Joe bumped in a rush past the table, losing his towel. He lunged for his pants and shirt, picked them up fast, but they were soaked. That left him pretty well naked and barefoot in a puddle, keeping back big laughter, holding his bundle of dripping clothes. And right away Connie was there in the doorway, surprised, her hair awry, her bathrobe open over the Harley t-shirt, her cheeks rising into her dark eyes as she grinned at the mess.

She said, "Joe?"

