

## Match

By Jeremy Louis Clark Jones

My brother jostled me, his hand gripped around the ball-joint of my clammy, bared shoulder squeezing so tightly he seemed to melt into me. A random chill darted through my mind, kinetic with sleep, and crashed sparkling behind my forehead. I mumbled some incoherency, still half immersed in a dream about his girl-friend, Sue....I was buck naked under the geyser of a fire-hydrant, laid out on top of her across the cold gray cement, sticking it to her....Resting all my weight on one arm, I leaned away from her firm prone body, and ran my fingers lightly over the outline of her square jaw. Her lips pursed and kissed my palm. She trapped my hand between her cheek and shoulder tucked warmly against her throbbing neck, safe from the cold spray of water that sprinkled on my hips and buttocks....I rolled over, flat on my back, and squinted my eyes open. George backed away from my bedside, unknowingly, to let the sun-light singe my face, to over-expose the image in my dream.

"What?" I mumbled groggily. The sun seemed to dry my watery eyes into a crust.

"Come on, bro, get the fuck out of bed," he barked. I pressed my hands into the mattress and tensed my arms. Sleep drained out of my muscles; my elbows locked and I sat up leaning against the wall. Tiny points of stucco itched my back.

"Pull the damn blinds," I barked, already irritated. "Shit, George it's gotta be nine in the morning."

George crossed my room and disappeared into the bathroom.

"Sure, I told the guy we'd be there somewhere between nine and ten to pick up the rail. He's got to go to class and I don't want to miss him," he said. His voice echoed above the hollow sound of urine drilling porcelain. "Besides, Mom's at work and Dad's locked up in the study. We can drive it into the living room for all he'll know."

It dawned on me that I had promised George I would take him to pick up a sand rail he planned to buy from a guy he had a class with at Florida Atlantic University. Our parents knew nothing of George's newest venture and definitely would not have approved anymore than I did. His logic was that he had earned the money himself working at Friday's, and as I had been off at Arizona State since Christmas, Mom and Dad wouldn't get mad at me for being involved.

"Great," I said leaning over to fetch a cigarette from my night-stand. The pack was on my digital clock radio where I'd left it the night before. I looked at the face of the radio, but it was blank. I heard George turn on the faucet and start humming. Tap water splashed in the basin. I rubbed my eyes, the crust seemed to have crystallized into sand. Having cleared my sight with my fists, I turned over onto my side and looked for the clock's plug. The book I'd been studying

from the night before had dropped off the bed and knocked it out of the socket. The two fangs clicked stiffly into the outlet: 12:00, 12:00....I swung around and placed my bare feet on the carpeted floor. Facing the open door to my room, I couldn't remember when I'd fallen asleep. The faucet stopped its hissing spray with a clunk and the pipes gurgled down through the floor.

"Hurry the fuck up," George said barging into the room. I scowled at him. His sharp-featured face gleamed with water. A solitary droplet balanced on the tip of his nose, hesitated and fell to the floor as he stood in front of me. Face to face, George and I are nearly twins, even though he's eighteen months older and more muscular. And he has a scar extending from the bridge of his nose down to the left nostril. The razor fine slash radiated a warm pink.

George stood up straight, throwing back his shoulders and pushing out his overly-developed pectorals like a parrot bluffing. His smooth, massive arms flew back and up above his shoulders mimicking a butterfly stroke through the air. George may look like a lumbering gorilla, but he's one hell of a swimmer. His thick hands fell to his narrow waist. He pushed back his hair with splayed fingers. The layered locks looked much at ease with the water matting them to the top of his head. In a few weeks he intended to shave his head and legs for a big statewide meet.

"You know if you stayed out of the sun or at least wore some sort of sun screen, your scar wouldn't swell-up like that," I told him. Though with all the outdoor swim meets....

"Give it up, you sound like the old lady," he said. George alternately loved and hated his scarred nose. It was seemingly his only physical flaw. Women loved to rub it and talk about it, or so he claimed. It only reminded me of how clumsy I am with a shovel and how beautiful my brother was.

George winked at me. It's in his eyes, that look that glows a warm blue confidence, a glint from a heart of gold. To some it's wisdom or simple self-confidence. But to Sue and, at times, to me it's that dangerous puncturing gaze that warns you he's willing to manipulate any woman into bed--anyone into anything, for that matter.

I reached for the pack of cigarettes. My fingers wrapped around the greasy cellophane of the box, which caught the blinking red light of the clock. Flipping open the lid, I pulled out a cigarette and put it in my mouth. The pack spun smoothly up to the clock and regained it's red reflection.

"Feed that monkey," George said sarcastically. He jumped onto the end of my bed, nearly bouncing me forward into the wall as I swiveled about looking for my lighter. The unlit cigarette dangled loosely from my lips.

"Look who's talking," I said with relief, having found my Zippo. It had somehow ended up under my pillow. The top came open with a ching. My thumb rolled the flint wheel and sparks spit out from the wind-guard. I ran the flint again and fire fluted up. Hot lighter fluid went up my nose and met with the nicotine rich smoke in the back of my throat. The flavors mixed; I inhaled with a wheeze.

"You should really quit smoking," George said with a shit-eating grin.

"Well, you should quit philandering," I rebutted.

The top of my lighter snapped closed with a ca-chink. I let my left hand fall from my face. The paper filter yanked a tender slice of skin from my chapped lower lip. I dropped the Zippo heavily on the wooden table: clunk. The cigarette smoked precariously on my knee inches from George. His arm snapped toward me as if to grab something. I started sideways--jumpy with guilt over my dream of Sue. My head hit the wall. George flicked the cigarette arching out of my hand. It skidded with a bounce off the wall in an explosion of sparks and ash, landing inches from my bunched chinos.

"D-aaaah," I exclaimed, lunging to grab it before the carpet caught on fire. The tan fibers had already started to melt by the time I arrived at where it had landed. As I bent at the waist, my lower back tightened like a knot. I picked up the cigarette with my left thumb and index finger and pressed the palm of my right hand into the curve of my spine like a pregnant woman gardening.

"Ha, got you out of bed," George hooted. He fell back holding his sides and rolling in laughter--as giddily as a child.

"You flaming idiot," I said. I dragged my foot over the black hole. A sharp sensation glimmered through my callused heel. Because I couldn't find an ashtray, I walked into the bathroom on the sides of my feet to avoid the cold tiles. I tossed the smoke into the toilet. It sizzled and circled slowly in a foam of urine. I flushed the toilet.

George ducked his head into the bathroom and threw my chinos at me. I caught the mass of fabric, snapped the pants straight, and pulled them up over each leg. With some effort, I straightened my boxers which had scooted crooked from my thrashing about in my sleep. A navy blue polo shirt hanging on the hook behind the door smelled clean enough, so I yanked it over my head. I tucked the shirt in and buttoned the chinos.

George, awkward and floppy looking, led me out of my bedroom. That he could be so goofy looking when he moves, yet so handsome when he stands still often amazed me. At the foot of the stairs in front of the short red-wood table, he snatched up the keys from the small, wicker basket used for that purpose.

"You seen my shoes?" I asked.

"No but you won't need them--come on, let's go," George said. He was sitting on the third stair from the bottom putting on a pair of black Reeboks. He stood up and searched the basket for his wallet, found it, and put it in the back pocket of his khaki shorts.

Pausing by the table next to the door I gawked at the wallet-sized photograph of George and Sue framed in tarnished silver. Finger smudges lined the sides of the glass from guests admiring the image of my brother. An uncharacteristic scene for George to be in really, he and

Sue looking so peaceful and happy. The two of them were sitting by the pool where the team practices every night. George, in a skimpy Speedo, was strumming up his unplugged black and silver Ovation, his left hand locked in a simple G chord. He was glancing in the direction of the camera lens with unfocused eyes, his thin-lipped mouth forming a circle in song. And Sue, wearing a one-piece, was smiling and mouthing the words to whatever song he was playing. One of her legs was kicking forward; her hands clasped as if in prayer before her breasts. Her auburn bob was wet and slicked back over her narrow forehead....Women. You'll lose yourself in them if your not careful. Pure distraction. You wake up the next morning someone else....

"You drive," George said already heading out the door, oblivious. The keys were mysteriously in my hand. As George walked out of the house and down the front walk, a large, exaggerated Arizona State Sun Devil laughed at me from the back of the T-shirt I had given him. Its tail was whipped around George's shoulder blade and its horns cocked forward. The blood red trident lashed out--admonishing me and guarding George.

Crossing over the threshold I slammed the door. The anchor shaped brass knocker jumped and resounded. I was greeted by the brilliant Florida sun already high and blazing that early in the morning. Humidity soaked the air and passed into my lungs, a suffocating goo. A slight sea breeze cut into it just enough to keep it from being fatal. Palm fronds ruffled overhead, then fell still. My eyes twirled a bit and yellow flashes passed before them. I wavered, longing for the dry Arizona spring. My head seemed to expand, swallowing the thick air, and constricted too rapidly for me to keep my balance. South Florida air, what a contact high, I thought. I steadied myself on the door frame.

"Hurry up, Ed," George said with one hand on the roof of the candy-apple Honda, the fingers of his other under the door handle, pulling at it impatiently. I walked toward him, still a little shaky on my feet, and around the front of the car. Fumbling with the keys, I half-heartedly remembered that I had forgotten my smokes. I aimed the black topped key at the lock, missed, and gouged a steel-colored dig into the red paint.

"Hurry the fuck up!"

"There's no hair on it," I said, "if there was hair on it I could get it in there." George laughed whole-heartedly--sinking at the knees below the roof out of sight and then springing back up suddenly. A broad smile etched across his face. The end of the key found the hole and grumbled into the lock. I turned it and the four locks unbolted.

We climbed into the car and settled ourselves. I turned the ignition, put my arm over the head rest of the passenger seat to look over my shoulder. Having pushed in the clutch, I shifted the gear into what I thought was reverse. My right foot pressed on the gas pedal. The perforation there pinched my bared arch. My left foot came off the clutch too quickly. The car lurched forward almost through the garage door. I looked at my feet, and then at the gear box. George cracked up. I shifted out of fifth gear and into reverse. With a little more concentration, I managed to get the car out of the driveway.

"Speaking of holes and hair," George said eventually, "Sue has been hawking on me something fierce these last couple days. I don't know what makes that girl tick, but shit..." his voice faded off into the din of morning traffic.

I stopped at a blinking red light at the intersection of 18th street and Military Trail. Construction lights on orange stripped signs flashed a yellow barely noticeable below the scorching rays of the sun. George turned on the radio, played with the dial until he found something he liked, and began to hum along with a song I had never heard before. As he turned the air conditioner knob, air shot out of the dusty vents, smelling of mildew and cold metal. I turned the car north on Military, following the "Detour" arrows.

"What's that all about?" I asked, indicating the steaming asphalt truck and jerseyed workers spread down east 18th. Veering to avoid a crumpled and bent cone, I nearly crashed into a white car in the left lane. The driver honked his horn. George rolled down his window, climbed half-way out of the passenger side window, and told the disgruntled motorist to fuck himself. The car sped passed us. George climbed back into the car, his face red and his hair puffy.

"Where the hell you been hiding," George asked excitedly, but otherwise unaffected by his outburst. "They're putting in a median and widening the lanes. You know what that means, don't you? Plenty of dirt for the rail. `Course we'll have to wait till the workers clear out for lunch."

"I have exams when I go back to ASU, George. I'm tired. And I've been locked up in the house studying since I got back and not driving around town..."

"So, tapering ends tonight and I've got a practice meet tomorrow at seven. Speed up, would you. But I'm still gonna burn up a little trail," he interjected. That's right, George had been out these last few nights drinking with Sue or his teammates and not at practice, I remembered. With George, tapering didn't mean lighter work-outs and lots of rest, but heavy drinking and too much free time.

"Good for you," I sniped. I switched lanes and headed east on Camino, crossed over the metro-rail tracks and turned at George's direction. I parked the car in front of a squat, flamingo colored house. A single story structure, slitted by occasional jalousie windows and torn screens. A mangy standard poodle squatted out a heaping turd on the weedy front lawn. Parked at an angle, half on the lawn and half on the pot-holed shell and coral driveway, the sand rail looked pitiful.

"That thing's a piece of shit!" I guffawed. "It's a death trap if I've ever seen one, George."

George seemed to fly out of the car. I took my foot off the clutch and the car stalled. The air conditioner shut off with a noticeable cessation of hiss. Warm air surrounded my limbs, sweat glistened on my lower arms almost immediately. I pulled the key from the ignition, yanked the door handle, and climbed out into the street. George was talking to a scrawny guy wearing dirty blue jeans and a gray concert T-shirt. His hair was long and stringy--possibly crimped. I quick-

stepped over the shards of shell in the driveway to have a look at the sand rail. Clouds passed in front of the sun casting an ominous darkness over the late morning.

I lightly kicked the heavy treaded tires with the ball of my foot. Firm enough, I thought. The rust speckled black alloy tubing, soldered into a frame resembling a generic sedan stripped of its paneling, flexed when I pushed at it. The machine rocked on the large yellow shocks jutting inwards behind the tires. Two black vinyl bucket seats pressed down nearly below the exposed axles. The engine, weak looking and covered with a black grime, was bolted behind the seats. Gasoline had leaked out of the gas tank that was elevated above the engine, forward toward the driver's seat. There was no gas-cap, just a piece of plastic trash bag rubber-banded on the nozzle.

A thin layer of sheet metal was tied to the frame with plastic strings like those sometimes used to hold the green screens up on a fence around a tennis court. I crouched down on my left leg, resting my left hand on the cross-bar that separated the engine from the seats, and bent over to look under the supposed base-board. My right leg rose up; I caught myself on my palm as I fell forward. I collected myself and examined the soft under belly of my brother's newest pet.

"Ed, you wanna go inside and have a beer before we head out?" George called from not far away.

"You know the floor of this thing's held on by plastic snaps and a wimpy little bar?" I said in a strained voice, still leaning to see the underside of the rail. The sun peeked from behind the clouds and shone brightly again.

"Hey, man, come on inside, I gotta get your brother here a helmet and we'll have a beer or something," the other guy said.

Straightening I pushed loose gravel from my palm. Two droplets of blood reflected the sunlight and shimmered. I wiped my hand across the front of my shirt as I followed them into the house. A strong, repulsing stench of dog dander and urine hit me like a brick wall. I sneezed and hesitated in the foyer--a cemented break in the imitation-wood paneling covering the rest of the walls.

"Ed, this is Bob," George said, slumping into a lime green couch. A television pitched its high tone. Blue light washed over George's face in waves. The poorly lit room stretched into a kitchen divided by a Formica counter cluttered with cereal boxes and empty beer cans. A refrigerator, papered with faded comics clipped from the Boca News, huddled in the far corner next to a window that opened into a back yard overgrown with blooming hibiscus.

Bob opened the refrigerator and produced three Mickey's big mouth malt liquors. He tossed one to George who caught it and peeled the aluminum tab and popped off the cap. Bob strolled over to me, shuffling the soles of his worn sneakers across the dirty linoleum. He handed me a Mickey's with a nod of his shaggy head and sat down on the moldy couch next to George.

"There's a few things you're gonna have to fix up on the rail, man," Bob admitted. "Like the clutch is about to go and it could go for oil soon. But shit, at least I filled her up with gas."

"For five hundred pigs you can't expect a perfect machine," George said, shaking his head. He wrapped his lips around the mouth of the stout green bottle, forming a circle much like the one in the photograph. He tilted his head and gulped down the malt liquor. Dropping the empty bottle onto the magazine strewn coffee table, he looked up at me and belched.

I arched the Mickey's Bob had given me at my brother a little too fiercely. George could hardly get his hands around it. The condensation made it slip through his grip and thump into his chest. George started laughing and tearing at the lid.

"What about a gas cap?" I asked Bob. "It can't be safe driving that thing. There's gas leaking all over the place." A slight exaggeration on my part.

"Yah, man, just get a cap at the gas station on your way home," Bob answered evasively. He sipped at his beer. George reached into his shorts' pockets and produced a key that he thumbed as he drank. Bob must have given him the key when I wasn't looking, I thought absently.

"Why didn't you get a cap when you filled it up?" I asked aggressively. They ignored my question.

We took off after George had had another beer or two. George is tall and muscular, but he doesn't handle alcohol well. As for me I can drink for hours....George drove the rail, because I can't drive for shit as he put it. I followed him in the Honda. He chirped second gear bolting from the light on Camino and skidded South onto 8th avenue. I shook my head and wondered whatever happened to the helmet Bob had promised. Oh great, I thought.

A ways down 8th a construction sign prevented access to the circle that wraps around to 18th street. George turned off to the Li'l General, parked down the side of the building and hopped out. His face was beaming with adolescent defiance. I drove up behind the sand rail, stopped the car, and cranked the window.

"What's up?" I asked, straining to make myself heard over the dings and pings of the cooling engines.

"You up for some beer?" He asked.

"Get me a pack of cigarettes while you're in there?" I yelled as George skipped to the front of the gray cinder- blocked, warehouse-like building. I parked the car. Opening the door, I rested my bare feet on the running board and stared at the jalopy my brother had just bought. It smelled of burnt rubber and gasoline, but I could see that no new gas had leaked from the tank.

George returned with a brown paper sack too small and narrow to be holding beer. He spun his free arm like a softball pitcher and whizzed a flip-top of Marlboros at me. I caught the

pack, peeled off the cellophane wrapper, tore the aluminum flap, and screwed a smoke in my mouth. I swiveled around and shut the door with a hermetic thump. George plopped into the passenger seat, closing the door behind him. The sack resting on his knees, he cracked his knuckles by pressing the backs of his fingers with his other palm. He handed me a tall, economy-sized bottle of MD 20/20 original and clutched one for himself. The bag fell to the floor of the car and a pack of matches fell out. So, that's his game, I thought. There's no way George would buy me cigarettes--he hates that I smoke--unless he was trying to soften me up, probably for money. Not fair, really, using an addiction to get at my wallet.

"How much you need?" I asked suspiciously. He waved off my comment, already sucking down the viscous ox-blood colored wine. I leaned over the stick shift and found the pack of matches by his foot. I struck a match; it roared its tiny flame into an aroma of burning sulfur. Placing the flame to the cigarette, I dragged heavily, insatiably. I disposed of the match, exhaled out the window, and unscrewed the brass colored cap on the MD 20/20. Click-click-click- click, the perforation gave way without a fight.

"Aaaaah, nothing like a little warm Mad Dog to get your motor started," George said with a broad-toothed smile. The skin, taut across his face, started to flush noticeably. Then, looking at the label with intense sincerity, "But I don't get what the 20/20 stands for."

"Perfect vision," I said through the blue smoke of the cigarette that I was pulling from my face. "A Mild Delirium that offers perfect vision." Greedily, I pushed the opening of my bottle between my lips, rotated it so that my front teeth caught the groove and pulled at my gums. As I sloped the bottle, the warm liquid flooded into my mouth, eroding the dry smoky film on my tongue, sanitizing the bacterial sensation of not having brushed that morning. Acrid at first, and a little dry, but eventually it spread its sweet aroma to my nose and barreled down my throat. My stomach took it in, gurgling and digesting in a frenzy of adjustment and anticipation.

My knees relaxed and my thigh muscles spasmed enough to tickle without hurting. I leaned back on the head rest and closed my eyes. The alcohol hesitated, waiting for its volume to increase before it rose. I pulled on the bottle again. Wine leaked over my lip, stinging where the filter had pulled the parched flesh. A burning in my chest ignited the fuel, sent it twisting into my fibrillating heart. I coughed a phlegmy hacking fit that I came out of dizzily. My shoulders lightened; I could feel each knot and gland as the fuel passed up my neck into the base of my skull...then a numbing explosion of euphoria. Quietly, almost a whisper: More, feed me more. Feed that monkey, Ed. I burst into laughter. I opened my eyes to the half full bottle and polished it off with a solemn chug-chug. Just enough liquid for the threshold, but too little for the...for the nearly narcotic high.

"How can you slam this stuff like that?" George asked in utter dismay. His wine was barely touched. George prefers beer, but he knows damn well that I relish every scent, taste, every sour hint of grape seed oil....My eyes tightened and teared: a burning moisture in the morning's gritty sand.

"I guess this means I'm driving the rail, `cause I'd say from the looks of you, you couldn't swerve a crooked line or even stand up," George opined.

"George, George, George," I blathered, resting my hand on his arm. "When the initial shock wears off, I'll be fine. Give me some of yours would you?"

We passed the bottle back and forth, each sipping from it conservatively: George cringed with a mounting distaste, and I, with faltering restraint. I looked at my watch and attempted to recount to myself the last few hours--stepping backwards into and through my dream of Sue....The cold cut watch arms doubled over each other: Noon.

"Earlier," I paused to swallow. "Earlier, you said Sue was hawking on you about something or other?"

George had his legs stretched out of the window and was staring off into the woods behind the Li'l General. A blue dumpster at the border of the scraggly pines began to smell as soon as I noticed its open lid. George seemed to have forgotten about the rail.

"Yah, she says I never have anything to say to her other than 'how's your kootch' and 'let's fuck,' which is absolute crap as far as I'm concerned. And you know how she gets. At about midnight she starts telling me she's bored and wants to go out and do something different. So, I say all right let's go to a late movie or play miniature golf or go to her apartment and watch TV, eat dinner--everything I can think of. And no matter how many things I suggest she just whines about how bored she is.

"I mean, it's not like it's my responsibility to keep her entertained all the time. Shit, I really hate tapering weeks. I gotta spend way too much time with her," he rambled without taking his gaze from the woods.

I lighted a cigarette and passed him the empty bottle. He held it in his lap without noticing.

"I tell you, George, if only I had that problem," I said--my voice coming not from my mouth but from the pacified monkey sleeping on my shoulders. "At least you can get a girl to want to spend time with you. At school there's thousands of the hottest women in the country, but they're all so stuck on themselves they won't give me a second glance. Hell if I had your looks and being on the swim team and all..." I faded off into a daze of supposition.

"It's not like high school anymore, bro, the competition is stiffer," George said with great resolve.

"Competition my ass, George. All you have to do is smile and flex your pecs and they're all over the top of you."

"Yah, but they wanna stay there on top of me and I can't seem to shake 'em. So I got some chick hovering around and I haven't got anything to say to her except 'how's your kootch' and 'let's fuck.' Ed, buddy, I sure would like to have your problem, instead of mine."

I giggled. The absurdity of the conversation blindsided me. George started chuckling, then we both howled until we were nearly crying and drooling on ourselves. It hit us simultaneously....

"The grass is always greener," we chorused in perfect harmony, as they say. George struck a match to inaugurate our agreement and we watched it burn down to his callused fingertips. We laughed some more.

"George?"

"Yah."

"I think I'm drunk enough now to ride in that thing."

"Let's hit it, bro."

"Sure thing, George. You drive?"

"Wouldn't have it any other way, Ed," George said as we got out of the Honda. Standing next to the open door, he took off the Sun-Devil T-shirt and dropped it in the car. It crinkled the brown sack. I pushed in the automatic locks and climbed into the sand rail, its frame bowing under my weight.

George nestled himself in the driver's seat, pulled the double strap seat belt over his shoulders and locked it into place. My belt buckled with a pop. I wiggled the clasp and tightened the waist line, pulling the shiny black, herringbone canvas through the scratched buckle. George stuck the key in the tube ignition held on by duct tape, turned it, and the whole apparatus fell, dangling on exposed wires. He held it flat in his palm, tried again, and the meek engine puffed, huffed, then exploded into a roar much like a lawn mower would sound amplified through a PA system --raspy and whiny.

Revvng the engine, George let out a whoop and popped the clutch, turning the wheel violently. The rail's light structure jolted backwards so severely George's hand fell off of the knobless stick-shift. I pressed forward into the belt--suspended for a brief moment in an atmosphere of horizontal gravity. He smashed on the brakes; I squished back into my seat, my neck snapping over the top. Exhaust wafted forward rich with the smell of gasoline. The rail lurched and raced around the back of the Li'l General.

We jounced over a curve, kicking up dirt in someone's freshly sodded lawn. The grass pallets gave way, wrinkled under our spinning wheels. George cut the wheel left, then right. The back slid, fish-tailing freshly turned soil. The treads skipped on the pavement of 18th, caught, and jettisoned the rail forward like a bat out of hell. The wind cut in through the glassless front window frame and around the side of the supports. My hair wiped my eyes, gnats crashed into my face. Approaching the top of the bridge over I-95, George kicked the brakes again. The rearend bit into the pavement with a squeal. We came to a crooked stop.

"What do you think, bro?" George asked, indicating the occasional construction worker sitting under a pineapple palm or on pick-up trucks' tailgates further on down 18th. The railroad crossing cut a boarder between us and them.

"Let's kick it, George," I blared. Wind was still howling in my ears as the drums tried desperately to process the delayed superfluity of percussiveness. A back beat of adrenaline pounded behind my eyes; the wine buzz heightened to a high whistle. The engine picked up a private orchestra of internal steel-drumming and sizzling drips.

George zigzagged down the bridge, picking up speed nonetheless. He arched the vehicle out drastically to the left, then yanked the wheel hard to the right. The slanted nose vibrated as we hit the grass that lined the fence separating Mizner Forest estates from the tracks. We glided broad-side at the fence; my head snapped again. This time, my gaze locked onto the chain link fence. Thick lawn yellowed by dried sand spurs leading to the gravel mound below the tracks reflected through the links. I thought of the tennis courts' screens and stomped my feet on the metal base-board. It twanged a tinny song.

"Hot oil, hot oil!" George pleaded.

George lost control, or over-compensated, the engine whirled around, then regained its forward momentum. We weren't going down the line of fence. A twig-like sapling sprang from nowhere. George tried to miss it, but the front right wheel rose over its flexing trunk. I fell into the cloudy white sky, then dropped head long into the fence as the seat belt unlocked. My head struck an alloy bar.

"Hot oil, hot oil!" George wailed. I looked at him, feeling queasy with pain and confusion, pressed awkwardly against the fence links and bent into a sitting position above the non-existent hood. A wall of flame echoed the gasoline as it immersed his body. A thin layer of blue flame, reddening, then yellowing washed over his back and exploded on his hair. George fell forward into the steering wheel, unconscious. The muscular meat of his shoulders, which had smelted with the sticky patches of black vinyl seat, glowed with expiring tongues of fire.

My fingers locked through the fence links, I pushed back into the fence, it sprang me forward at George, slicing my skin under each knuckle. The fire was dying; the gasoline spent. I fumbled for his buckle, yanked it away from his waist. I was pushing with one hand on his hip, the other on his shoulder. His body began to fall from the cock-pit, but caught on the belt. My momentum sent me over the top of him, tumbling into the scorched grass. I sat up, wrapped my hands tightly under his left armpit and tugged his body loose. He fell on top of me; I whimpered.

"Ed," he moaned. "Hot oil."

Scooting my heels under me, I crouched and dragged his body away from the smoking wreckage. One of the orange construction trucks whizzed up behind me. Three men jumped from the cab, their orange bibs fluttering in the hot breeze.

"We saw what happened," one said.

"Get him in the back of the truck," said another. Two of them picked up George. Is he alive, my brother, is he alive? George? The third worker hoisted me into the payload next to George's prone body. He was face down, his nose turned toward me, mouth gaping and drooling. His eyes were closed, but bulging as if he were dreaming. A purplish-black swirl of raised flesh pulsed where his hair had been. His back heaved....

The emergency room was a blur of screaming his name and mine. A policeman chased after me with pen and pad in hand as I paced in large circles around the white reception room wondering where they'd taken George. I stopped at one point, transfixed by a Coke machine. Lifting my arms from my side, I slowly examined my body. Every hair, every fiber and cell was intact. I had been spared the flame. Why? And why hadn't George? Or had he been? I wasn't sure.

Sand spurs crunched in the soles of my feet as I crossed to the pay-phone by the sliding glass entrance-way. I searched my pockets for change, found none, and picked up the receiver, dialed the operator, and waited. A grinding ring, then another.

"This is your operator. Thank you for choosing AT&T. How may I help you?" a voice said through the heavy plastic grating on the ear-piece.

"I would like to make a collect call from Edward," I said and gave her my home phone number....

Traumatic shock worked its magic, nursing me past the terrifying moments of transitory realization and rendered me numb until my mind was able to digest that George would live. My parents appeared and picked up where the shock left-off. While we waited in the lobby, Mom worked the spurs out of my bleeding feet with tweezers, swabbing the punctures with cotton balls soaked in alcohol. Dad had disappeared behind the foreboding swinging doors that lead into the examination rooms or wherever.

Some doctor suggested that I go home and get rest. For what, I asked, but went home anyway. Mom drove her station wagon as if it were made of eggshell and me a glass figurine. Back home she tucked me into bed, covered me with more quilts and blankets than that time of year normally allowed. I was feverish with chills, but the covers felt comfortable all the same.

A few days later they let me visit George in his room in Boca Hospital. As I was leaving the house, I stopped in front of the photograph at the foot of the stairs. I didn't really look at it so much as stare at it. I picked up the silver frame and slid the photo out from under the smudged glass. Removing my wallet from my back pocket, I flipped it open and stuffed the picture into a credit card slot. In a strange way, I thought it might be easier to not visit him. To pretend he was off at a swim meet comforted me, but left an anxiousness in my stomach that would not clear until I saw him. I replaced my wallet, and followed Mom to the station wagon.

"Ed," he said into his crispy white pillow. His back and head were alternately covered and exposed. A wet cloth obscured his face. Doctors no longer use many wraps or as much ointments and salves as they used to, but the pus and yellow fluid gives the same effect.

I walked around the elevated bed and sat on a small metal stool facing him.

"How you feeling, George?" I asked him. But I meant much more than the words suggested.

"My nuts are swollen the size of grapefruits, my back feels like a steak on the barbecue, and the morphine they keep jacking into me has got me so high I think I'm superman," he mumbled slowly. He grinned with satisfaction after he had finished this short monologue.

"Why are your nuts swollen, George?"

"The morphine, they think I might be allergic to it," he said.

"Ed, lean over here for a second," he said. I bent forward staring into his pale blue eyes that peeked from under the cloth. "Ed, and this is very important: Does my breath stink? The nurse is coming in soon for the debreeding and she's really hot."

"It smells fine," I said.

"Good, bro, I'm gonna take a nap," he said closing his eyes. "Stay a while, will you?"

"Sure, rest easy, George."

George dozed off and I sat there staring at him and listening to the intravenous drip. Almost as an after thought, I reached around to my back pocket and took the photograph out of my wallet. I placed it on a table on the other side of the bed, hoping it would keep him company while I was gone. I crossed the room into a small bathroom that smelled of antiseptic and ammonia. I flicked the light switch, lifted the seat on the toilet, and stood there a moment. I unzipped my fly and urinated. The door to the room opened and a nurse shuffled passed the open bathroom doorway pushing a steel cart covered with a towel.

"George, wake up," she whispered.

"Hmh," he moaned.

"George, it's time for your cleaning," she said softly in a slightly louder tone.

"I'm awake," he grumbled. Metal instruments scratched on the tray.

"Oh, George who's this?" she said.

"My brother," he said, still half immersed in sleep.

"Is he a musician?"

"Edward," he said.

Resting my left hand on the cold ceramic basin, I turned on the faucet and splashed water on my face. Slumping on both scabby palms I looked up into the mirror at the unfamiliar face that stared back at me--unscarred, immaculate. And I cried for the first time in days.