

The Scream

by Dorothy Salisbury Davis, 1916-2014

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Sally had called him a "mother's boy" when he wanted to leave the party at eleven. It hurt and angered him, but what angered him most was that he hadn't left right then. He stayed on, as though that was going to change her feelings toward him. She'd turned her attention to guys he didn't even know and didn't think she did. She said she'd hitch a ride in one of the other cars. Now he was really late. He drove up the ravine trail furiously, scattering stones and gravel, ripping through the bramble. Midnight wasn't late for that gang, even on a school night, even though they'd lost the beer to the cops who had intercepted them on the way down. He had an old-fashioned mother who pretended she wasn't a single parent. Sometimes she told people her husband was away on business. But sometimes, when she and David were alone, she would call him the man of the house and say how much she depended on him.

As soon as he cleared the park drive he opened up the Chevy. He'd got in the habit of worrying about his mother when he didn't get home on time. This angered him, too. What he worried about was her worrying about him, and it made him feel tied up. Or down. He kept flooring the accelerator until he turned off the highway onto a two-way shortcut via the old County Road.

He thought of Sally and the guy who'd been trying to make out with her when David took off. He was a wimp. David hated him. Sally seemed to like wimps. She had an overload of energy and breasts like ice cream cones. He hit top speed again. Nobody used the County Road except the locals. With not a car in sight, he reached into his breast pocket and fished out the orange packet. He rolled down the window thinking, One more for the road: His joke on himself. He had yet to use one of the damn things in a real situation, yet to suggest to Sally or any other woman that he had one in his pocket. He threw it out against the wind and felt immediately that it might have blown back into the car. He glanced around. In less than a breath of time he turned back to the road. A car, dead ahead, no lights, had stopped half on the pavement, half on the shoulder. He swerved across the middle line, then, starting to careen, he let the wheel take control. The Chevy swung back and he saw the woman coming around from in front of the parked car. He saw her scream. Didn't hear it. Her face, the mouth wide, seemed to zoom at him. He pulled the car away from her and fought to control it by acceleration. The woman flung herself against her car, sandwiched between it and the Chevy when he passed. He got command, his hands frozen around the steering wheel. He was faint with fear, but he hadn't hit her. He was sure of it. He would have heard something, a thump, a noise, something, if he had. He was sure of it. He did not stop.

"Davie, is that you? Are you just getting in?"

"I've been downstairs for a while," he lied. He squeezed the words through a dry, tight throat.

"Then you should have finished your studies before you went out. "I know." At her bedroom door he said, "Good night, Mother."

"I need a kiss," she said, and when he brushed her forehead with his lips, "Now I'll be able to sleep."

He drew the door almost closed. The cat wriggled through and followed him down the hall. It wove itself between his legs in the bathroom and then rubbed against him when he sat on the edge of his bed to take off his sneakers. As soon as he removed one, the cat jumped it and worried its head into the toe.

"Allie, it stinks!" He buried his face in the crook of his arm. "Like me."

He woke up before he finished the Our Father. In the next second the spiraling plane would have hit the ground. He lay, abruptly wide awake, knowing what he had dreamt, and wondered why he had not been scared. He'd felt calm and oblivious to the other passengers, who were also about to die. "Forgive us our trespasses..." Suddenly he remembered the face he'd kept seeing while he lay in bed last night, unable to fall asleep, the scream he couldn't hear. If he looked at the wall now he would see it again. If he closed his eyes he would see it. He wrenched himself out of bed. Every bone in his body ached. Every muscle was taut.

His mother called to him from downstairs wanting to know if he was up. She had called him before and he had fallen back into sleep, into the dream. He leaned over the banister and shouted down that he'd be ready in ten minutes. In the shower he told himself that he must go back to where it happened. What good would it do now? He couldn't have hurt her. She'd have been scared, fainted maybe. But how could he not have hurt her? With him going at that speed, the wind could have pulled her to him. But he'd have known it, felt it. And if he had, wouldn't he have stopped? He had not stopped. That was why he had to go back.

David resembled his mother. He was slight, with straight, tawny hair, very blue eyes. The sharp, delicate features made him feel that he looked like a choir boy. He'd got in the habit of pulling down the corners of his mouth. Tough guy, his mother said of it once, which was exactly what he wanted. The one thing he didn't want now was his mother getting a good look at his bloodshot eyes. "I had an awful dream before I woke up," he said. It might explain or distract.

She sat, her chin in her hand, and watched him pour milk shakily into his cornflakes, not seeming to notice anything different in him from other mornings. She was dressed for work, waiting for her ride to arrive any minute. "Want to sort it out?" she said.

"I was going down in a plane crash. There were lots of people screaming, but I wasn't scared." He'd made up the screaming part. He couldn't remember them screaming.

"What else do you remember? Little things," she coaxed. She liked to interpret his dreams for him. She had done it since he was a little kid, a game he kind of liked.

Now he wished he hadn't mentioned this one. "I woke up before we crashed."

"If you weren't scared, what were your feelings?"

He shrugged. "Like, philosophical. I said the Our Father." He pushed away from the table. "Mom, I got to go. Professor Joseph always calls first on the kids who come in at the last minute. We call him Sneaky Joe."

"You miss your father. That's what your dream's about."

"Yeah." He got up. The cornflakes barely touched, he put the dish on the floor for the cat.

"Why don't you write and tell him that, Davie?"

Again he shrugged.

"I know you could tell him things you don't tell me," his mother said.

"Okay, Mom. I'll do that." He was desperate to get away from her. He couldn't even manage the usual peck on the cheek.

"Are you going to be all right to drive?" she called after him.

"Why not?" Each day he drove the twenty miles to St. Mary's College, picking up two classmates on the way.

"You're jittery. You're working too hard. You ought not to work late at night. Your sleep's important, Davie. You're still growing."

"Yes, Mother. Yes!" If only her ride would come. He wanted to call his passengers and tell them they had to get to school on their own that morning. It would commit him to going back there.

She called after him: "I have pot roast in the Crock-Pot if you'd like to bring someone home to dinner."

He was shocked at the scratches on the fender and the door when he first saw the car in daylight. It must have happened coming down or coming up from the water's edge. Going down, he'd been concentrating on Sally's hand getting nearer and nearer his thigh. And then the sheriff's patrol had stopped the three cars and confiscated the beer. The cops had made them get out of the cars, and they asked each one if they had any joints or other dope. They hadn't searched anybody. Sally said afterward that if the deputy had laid a finger on her, her father would have had his badge by morning. Some of the other boys went to St. Mary's, too, which had turned coeducational recently. Like him, they were day students, but they were upperclassmen. One of the deputies had flashed his torch in David's face and then asked to see his driver's license. He couldn't believe David was a college student. Sally tittered. She didn't say it then, but

later—mother's boy. He took a chamois to the scratches and turned up the local station on the radio. The only traffic incident reported was a three-car crash on the interstate. He'd bet no one ran away from that one.

The macadam was still silvery from the overnight frost when he turned into County Road. Tire tracks crisscrossed and then disappeared where the sun's first rays skimmed the surface. The temptation to turn back was getting to him. He made himself go on, one road sign to the next. He reached the underpass beneath the suburban railway. Then he lost his nerve. He turned around beneath the arch and headed for school.

It was too late to go to his first class. In the library he asked at the desk if he could see the *County Sentinel*, not yet on the shelf. The librarian wanted to know if he had a hot number. The lottery. "Look, you never know," David said.

He went through the paper column by column. *Crime Watch*: "The sheriff's patrol reported no arrests, significant crimes, or serious accidents." He was disappointed. Crazy, but that was how he felt. He returned the paper and headed for his second class. It struck him then: The accident on the interstate had not been reported either. It was too soon. But not for it to have been on the radio. Could that mean that nothing very serious had happened on County Road? But something had happened. Suppose he never found out. He didn't think he'd ever forget it. But say that woman wasn't supposed to be where she was, it was a stolen car maybe, and say that by a miracle she wasn't hurt, or suppose there was someone in the car she wasn't supposed to be with, say someone dragged her into the car afterward. Maybe she was hurt. Or dead. If she had banged her head, say, on her own car, he wouldn't have heard that, would he? Just because he hadn't heard anything didn't mean nothing happened. All morning he kept turning over in his mind different possibilities, knowing that only one of them, and maybe none, was so. His imagination would not let go. He was such a good liar, why couldn't he lie to himself? He ought to keep track of the lies he told. A priest once said to him about confession, "Don't simply pick a number as though it's a lottery." Which was exactly what he used to do.

Lying was his big problem from when he was a little kid. It always surprised him that people, his mother, for example, took for granted he was telling the truth. Or did they pretend, too? Pretend they believed him. During his first session with the St. Mary's student advisor they'd had a long talk on why people lied, even professional liars like spies, and what it did to a man's character to lie habitually. Women did it for fun, the advisor said, and then added quickly that he was making a joke. David wasn't sure. But he wound up taking as his elective the Christian Ethics course the advisor recommended. His mother was pleased. Someone told her that Father Moran would be supportive. Of a student with a father absent from home, David supposed, though nobody said it to him.

He kept making up excuses to himself to skip ethics class that afternoon. He didn't want to blurt out something he couldn't explain. The kids taking the class were hound dogs on the scent for heresy. Some of them had flunked out of seminary and were going through a kind of rehab. Father Moran paid them special attention. The Church needed more priests and nuns to make up for the dropouts. Father Moran was one of the few religious on the faculty and probably wouldn't have lasted at St. Mary's till now if there wasn't the shortage.

David kept returning to his car all morning to catch the local news on the radio. He was nauseous, and in the mirror he looked as pale as a boiled potato.

In the mirror, behind his own face, was the image of a man approaching, looking, David thought, at the license numbers of the cars as he worked his way through the parking lot. David felt in his bones the man was looking for him. He switched off the radio.

The stranger wore an out-of-date polo coat that was too big for him and a slouch hat that made his face look small, his features pinched, mean. He stooped to look in at David and took a quick survey of the inside of the car at the same time. He pushed his hat back and gestured that he wanted David to roll his window down. Reluctantly David obliged.

The man couldn't smile. The attempt was like a nervous tic. "You're David Crowley, right? I'm Dennis McGraw." He handed David his business card: DENNIS HENRY MCGRAW, ATTORNEY-AT-LAW. "I'm an associate of Deputy Sheriff Addy Muller's. Deputy Muller was on the welcoming committee when you and your friends went down to the beach last night." He gave the tic of a smile. "He could have hauled you in-you know, a public beach. Do you mind if I get in the car with you? It's cold out here." "I have a class in twenty minutes, Mr. McGraw." But the man was already lurching around to the passenger side. He took notice of the scratches and pursed his lips to show his awareness. He eased into the seat alongside David. His coat overflowed it. "They say it's going to rain. Feels more like snow. It's a funny time of year for a beach party. Coming up Halloween, I suppose. And privacy's no problem on the beach in October, is it?" Again, the smirk. "Relax, David. We'll get you to your class on time. Addy said it was a long shot, but he remembered you lived in Oak Forest and could have been driving on the County Road last night..."

Once again the lie seemed safer to David. He shook his head.

"The interstate?"

"That's right," David said.

"Well, Addy said it was a long shot. I don't know why anyone would take the County Road unless the interstate was shut down... or they had some mischief in mind. About what time was it when you got home?"

David took alarm. He ought not to have lied. He pumped himself up and said, "It's none of your business, mister, and if you don't get out of this car, I'm going to turn you over to the security police." McGraw spread his hands. "What did I say?"

"I want to know why you're asking me these questions."

"You aren't giving me a chance to tell you." If David could have stopped his ears, he would have, rather than hear the very thing he wanted to know.

"But there's no point to it if you didn't take the County Road," McGraw went on. "The reason I asked about the time: There was an accident that shut down the interstate for a couple of hours after midnight. Nobody got through going your direction."

David was about to say that he must have got through just ahead, but he bit his tongue. He might be able to back out now before he got in deeper. "Could I see your identification, Mr. McGraw? Anybody could pick up that business card you showed me."

"Smart boy. I'm like Abe Lincoln, David. I have an office but mostly I carry my business in my hat. All you got to do is call up the sheriffs office and speak to Deputy Addy Muller. He'll tell you who I am."

David drew a deep breath and tried to lie himself out of the he. "I didn't want to get involved in anything. I mean, you're a lawyer and that generally means trouble."

"I can't argue with you on that, David. I'm the first person my clients call when they get in trouble."

"I did go home by the County Road, but I don't know what time it was. I was supposed to be in by midnight."

"Driving alone, were you?"

"I didn't know many kids at the party. My girlfriend invited me."

"Didn't you take the young lady home?"

"She got a ride from one of the other guys. I don't know what you want from me, but I've got to go now and I want to lock the car."

"Five minutes more?" McGraw said.

"No, sir. I don't know you and I don't see why I should talk to you."

"Then I'll tell you what you should do, David. First chance, drive over to the sheriff's office. You know where that is. Ask for Deputy Muller. He's investigating an incident on the County Road last night. He's looking for witnesses."

And there it was: Something had happened. He'd run away from something real. "Okay, I'll do that," David muttered, his voice shaky. Then, realizing what hadn't been said: "Witness to what?"

"If you don't know, you better ask Deputy Muller." McGraw stuck out his hand as though expecting David to shake it. He withdrew it before David had a chance to take or refuse it. "Unless you'd like me to represent you? I'm well thought of in the County Building. It's never a mistake to have legal counsel, David, always a mistake to go it on your own. You told me you went home on the interstate. Why did you tell that little lie? Addy's going to want to know."

David turned the key in the ignition. He wasn't sure what to do—one security guard for the whole campus. He had to get rid of this guy. He was a crook, an ambulance chaser. But he knew something.

"No hard feelings," McGraw said. He opened the car door and slipped out, pulling his coat after him. It clung to the seat and he had to yank it free. David wanted to laugh. And cry. McGraw stood wriggling, trying to straighten himself inside the oversize garment. David revved the motor and circled fast. There was a terrible familiarity to the whirr of the tires. He did not look back.

The whole class jumped on him when he said he thought Judas Iscariot wasn't as bad as the Christians made him out to be. Maybe he thought of himself as a whistle-blower, that Jesus wasn't good for the Jewish people—"Too much forgiveness—you know, like the woman who committed adultery."

"Money, money, money," students in the back of the room chanted. "He did it for money." It was their way of breaking into David's tirade.

"But he didn't want the money. Look what he did with it!" David didn't know what was happening to him to be shooting off like this. He didn't even know how long he'd been on his feet. Father Moran had settled his backside on the edge of the desk and folded his arms like a fat Buddha. He was enjoying himself. He loved it when his boys got their adrenaline flowing. Always his boys—he hadn't yet got used to the presence of girls in the class. "I don't think Jesus himself was fair to him," David went on. "He knew Judas was in trouble. He was the one who said the disciples should pray 'Lead us not into temptation.' Man, did Judas ever get led into temptation. What I'm saying is, Jesus knew. He knew what was going to happen to Judas. Look what he said to Saint Peter: 'Before the cock crows, you'll deny me three times.' And Peter did. And he cried. So did Judas. He went out and wept bitterly." David lost his train of thought. Actually, it was Peter who went out and wept bitterly.

Father Moran took over. "Well, Crowley. You certainly got our adrenaline flowing. Watch out the devil doesn't catch up with you. He's always on the lookout for a good advocate." The priest shifted his weight, from one buttock to the other. "Tell me, what do you understand to be Iscariot's greater sin—that he betrayed the Lord or that he despaired of being forgiven?"

"Despair is the greatest sin." It was an answer out of his childhood catechism. "Why?"

"I don't know, Father." He did not want to be quizzed like a ten-year-old. His moment of self-assurance was going down the drain.

The back row all had their hands up. The priest nodded to one of the volunteers.

Then David caught hold of another idea. "But despair is a sin against yourself, isn't it? Being your own judge. Betraying somebody is worse, it seems to me. You're hurting somebody else."

"Mitchell, you're on," the priest said to the volunteer, ignoring David's attempted postscript, except to say, "Thank you, Crowley."

David tried to listen to Mitchell's definition of despair as a sin against hope, and his denunciation of Judas because he had given up hope. It went on and on. David could have put it in one sentence. Somebody had done that, he realized, which was how it came into his mind: Abandon hope, all ye who enter here. Meaning hell.

It looked like the class wasn't going to get back on track until everybody had their say on why Judas was so despicable—the kiss, the pieces of silver; somebody said he was jealous of John, the disciple whom Jesus loved. "I know! He was gay!" one of the girls put in. She covered her mouth and giggled. The giggle was infectious and those around her laughed. David pretended to be amused, but he wasn't. He felt he'd been onto something important and had been cut off before he got to the heart of it. He'd had a question he wanted to ask that he felt would shake up even Father Moran. Now he couldn't remember it.

Between Christian Ethics and his last class, he copied a friend's notes for Twentieth Century French Literature, the class he had missed that morning, but his mind kept going back to Dennis McGraw and what he called "the incident" the sheriff's deputy was investigating. You wouldn't call anything serious an incident, would you? Suppose he found out tomorrow that the screaming person had not been hurt, not the least bit hurt, that the scream was an act, would that mean he was not guilty of anything? Look now: Was guilt a matter of luck? Getting caught was, maybe. Wasn't that why he was in ethics, to learn why getting caught was not part of the moral issue? And wasn't getting caught what he was really afraid of? He didn't care about that woman at all. Not for her own sake. The person he cared about was David Crowley.

He tried to focus on the Valéry poem in which he was supposed to trace the Symbolist influence, but he couldn't concentrate. It was hopeless, and he was supposed to be good in French. David felt as though something inside him was writhing, a stomachful of snakes. The day was almost over, but terrible as it had been, he dreaded for it to end. He didn't want to go home. He had to talk to someone. For just a minute he wondered if he should have been such a smart-ass with Dennis McGraw. McGraw wanted to talk to him. McGraw knew something. He didn't.

On his way home he thought about his father and what his mother had said at breakfast, how he could tell his father things he couldn't tell her. He was

pretty sure she was talking about sex, but if his father was around would he be able to tell him what he'd done, how he'd run away when he might have hurt somebody? He could see his father going out to the car and saying, "Get in, David." He'd order David's mother back into the house and he'd drive straight to the sheriff's office and say, "My son has a statement to make." Even so, David thought, he could tell him sooner than he could tell his mother. What he wanted most was not to have to tell anybody, to wake up and find out it was a dream.

He drove around the block twice before turning into the driveway, in case McGraw or someone from the sheriff's office was waiting for him. He saw no one, and when he parked in front of the garage door, the nearest neighbor was coming out of her house. She waved to him, got into her car, and drove off. Perfectly normal. In the house he got the same feeling of normalcy. It made him uneasy, as if he might step where there was nothing for his foot to land on. There were no messages for him on the answering machine. Even the cat ignored him. He looked up Dennis McGraw in the yellow pages. He'd thought he might not be there, but he was, the address the County Building. Something was real, anyway: Dennis McGraw, attorney-at-law. He had an enemy, David thought. For the first time in his life he had a real enemy. That was crazy. All McGraw wanted was to make a buck out of him. Unless you'd like me to represent you... But David hadn't admitted anything, except going home on the County Road. McGraw had looked for him because Deputy Muller had a hunch. Oughtn't car license numbers to be available to the police only? Everybody knew the sheriff's office was corrupt. The patrol shouldn't have just taken the beer away last night, they ought to have chased the kids out of the park or arrested them for bringing beer there in the first place. He wondered if any of the other guys had been approached by McGraw. Whoever took Sally home would have had to use the interstate or the County Road; he hadn't thought of that before. They almost certainly had to go that way, and if they had, it would have been after David's trip home.

He hated to call Sally. He was shaky, and if there was anyone he wanted less than his mother to know what he'd done, it was Sally. He kept putting off calling her until it was almost time for his mother to come home, and then he went out and used the nearest public phone.

"I wanted to be sure you got home all right last night," he explained.

"You'd have known by now if I didn't. It was real mean of you, David, to go and leave me with that pack of wolves."

"I didn't leave you! You said... whatever you said. It doesn't matter. What happened?"

"What almost happened on the way home was worse. We had to go the County Road-the interstate was closed..."

"I know," David said. "What happened to you, I mean?"

"The guys were fooling around. They're sex fiends, and all of a sudden we almost hit a car parked halfway on the highway. No lights, nobody around, like it died and somebody just left it there."

David saw the whole thing in his mind's eye. "Did you stop?"

"Why should we have? We didn't hit it or anything. But it cooled off Micky's sex urge. When we got to Oak Forest, he dropped me at our driveway and took off."

If the car was still there later, what did it mean? What had happened to the woman?

"If I didn't see it," David said, the words of denial slipping out, "you must have come home a lot later than me."

"Not much. I kind of agitated to get us on the road. I'm sorry I said what I did, David. You shouldn't be so sensitive. Women can be frustrated too, you know. You're not crude like those other guys, and I admire that. I admire a lot about you."

"Thanks," he murmured.

"What do I have to do to make up for what I said? Ask you for another date? I was the one who asked you last night, you know."

"I'll call you real soon, Sally."

"I go back to school on Sunday." She was on midterm break.

"I'll call you," he said again.

"Okay, David. Thanks for calling." The phone clicked off.

Now he had hurt her, but he couldn't help it. He stood in the booth after hanging up and tried to find the words with which he could tell Sally what had happened to him. It went fine until he had to say, I didn't stop. They hadn't stopped either, but they'd not seen the screaming woman.

A man waiting to use the phone pushed open the door. "Do you always go into a phone booth when you want to talk to yourself?"

After an early dinner at the kitchen table David attacked his class assignments. He surprised himself with what sounded to him like a great exposition of the Valéry poem. It felt good, as though he'd made some kind of reparation in getting it done. He took it in to where his mother was writing letters and read it to her. He'd been pretty quiet at dinner and she hadn't fussed or probed. He was making up.

She listened thoughtfully. Then, out of a clear sky, she said: "Would you like a year of study in France if it could be managed?"

David was stunned. It was as though she had said she no longer needed him. He'd been thinking all along that he was tied to her for life, and now it turned out she felt she was tied down by him. Maybe she had a man he didn't even know about, somebody at the bank... A tumult of alarms possessed him.

"Well?" she prompted.

"Yeah, sure. I mean, that's a third-year alternative and I'm only a freshman."

"Only a freshman," she repeated. "You put yourself down, Davie. You shouldn't do that. The essay is very good."

"It isn't long enough to call an essay."

"Nevertheless. Would you like to read the poem itself to me?"

He was on his way to get the book when the phone rang. His mother called out to let the machine take it for now. He pretended not to hear her. All evening, except for when he lost himself in the poem, he had anticipated something heavy about to happen. Nevertheless, when he heard McGraw's voice, his heart gave a sickening thump.

"David, I hope I'm not interrupting your dinner. We need to make a date, you and I. Tonight is convenient for me, or first thing in the morning."

"No," David said. "It's not convenient for me."

"Then you must make it convenient. It's not a matter of choice, young man. Are you with someone now so that you can't talk?"

"My mother's home," David murmured.

"Well now, sooner or later, you will want to involve her. Maybe not. That's not my business. Let's meet somewhere in the morning. I would say my office, but

it's being decorated. Unavailable, really. And I don't want to meet in your car again. We're not conspiring thieves, are we?"

"David?" his mother called inquiringly from the study.

"I'll be in in a minute, Mother." To McGraw, he said, "You can come here in the morning, but not before eight-thirty." It was his mother's turn to drive. She'd leave by eight o'clock.

McGraw repeated the time and checked David's address. He had it right.

Returning, book in hand, to where his mother was waiting, David explained, "I got some scratches on my car going down to the beach last night. A guy's going to paint them for me."

"Have it done by a professional, David. I'll help you pay for it."

"Great," he said.

"Not everything is great," she said. Then: "Shall we put off the poem until another time?"

McGraw arrived not long after the hall clock struck the half-hour. David had again cut loose his riders. He took the lawyer to the kitchen. McGraw was wearing the same topcoat. He took it off and put it on the back of a chair and perched the hat on top of it. "It's a good thing I make house calls, isn't it? Any coffee left in the pot?"

David poured half a mugful and heated it in the microwave. McGraw was taking inventory of every convenience in the kitchen-like he was pricing it for a yard sale.

He took the coffee black. "Why don't we start with your side of the story first, David—what really happened to you on the way home?"

"I'm not going to tell you anything," David said.

"In that case, hear this," McGraw said. "A farmer whose address is rural box seventeen on the County Road heard a woman scream out in front of his place after midnight last night. It woke him from a sound sleep. He looked out, thought he saw a car stalled on the road, and decided to call the sheriff's patrol. The call was clocked at twelve-twenty. But on account of the accident on the interstate, the patrol didn't pick up on it till daylight. I went out there myself with Addy Muller, drove him, in fact. He was dead on his feet after a double shift. But the farmer was pissed at how long it took the sheriff's men to show up. I'm telling it to you straight, David..."

David didn't say anything. McGraw took a noisy sip of his coffee. "Addy remembered you kids on the beach and figured you might've been heading home about then. He remembered you live in Oak Forest. He asked me if I'd like to look you up while he made the rounds of the hospitals. You were the one he remembered by name and school. He thought you were too young to be running with that crowd.

"You didn't want to talk to me, David; you didn't show much respect for the truth either. In other words, you were scared. I can see why.

"It turns out the woman was on her way home from work, tired, late, and she had to relieve herself. No traffic that she could see. She pulled halfway off the road, turned off the lights, and went in front of the car. Now wouldn't you like to take it from there?" David was silent.

"David, there was a witness. You were driving at high speed, came out of nowhere just as she came around from in front of the car. You could have made sausage meat of her, and you didn't even stop."

"I didn't hit her. I know that."

"How do you know?"

"I just do."

"So what do you think happened to her?"

David shook his head.

"But you didn't care as long as you could get away."

"I did care, but I knew I hadn't hit her."

"You knew?" McGraw waited, breathing noisily, a snort.

"What happened to her, mister?" David could feel that terrible tightness in his throat.

"I'm not a doctor," McGraw said.

"Is she all right?"

"I wouldn't say that. Oh, no. But she is alive."

David caught the emphasis on "she."

"You said there was a witness. Were they in the car with her?"

McGraw gave him the sad smirk of a smile. "No, David, you are the witness."

He wondered how that could be and then realized he had in effect confessed to McGraw. He'd been trapped. He had trapped himself. And he was all he cared about. Not the woman. She wasn't a real person to him. She was a scream, like a face he'd brought up on the computer screen.

"I want to see her," he said. What he wanted was to feel her, to flesh-and-blood feel her.

"You could have seen her at the scene. Now it's up to her whether or when she will see you."

"What am I supposed to do, mister?"

"Exactly what I advised you to do yesterday: Go over to the sheriff's office this morning and give Deputy Muller your statement."

"And if I don't?"

"They'll come and get you, David. I can promise you that. The woman will swear out the warrant for your arrest."

And the arrest would be reported in the *County Sentinel* "Crime Watch". But the woman was alive: Why couldn't he say thank God and mean it? He hated himself for what came into his mind and for saying it, but he did: "What if I asked you to represent me?"

"It's too late for that," McGraw said, sounding regretful.

"You're representing her, aren't you?"

"Such a smart young man. David, would you believe me if I told you I don't wish to represent either of you in a court of law? You will agree surely that you owe the unfortunate woman something simply on the strength of the information we have exchanged here this morning?"

"Isn't this some kind of blackmail, mister?"

"What a dirty word. No, David. I am offering you an honorable solution to something that could be very nasty. It could mess up your life, your career, people knowing you'd run away like that. What I haven't told you till now—the woman was pregnant, David. She miscarried after the accident."

David felt the message like a blow to the stomach. He had trouble getting his breath.

"I think we can call it an accident," McGraw went on, "but in her mind it was murder."

"I'm sorry for her," David said finally, and it wasn't associated with McGraw's mention of murder. It was for something lost.

"Sorrow's too cheap, David. Think about it and after you've seen Deputy Muller, let's talk again. She's a poor, hardworking woman. A settlement would not impoverish your family."

David watched McGraw down the driveway; the coat as he struggled into it swished out like Batman's cape. He tucked it around him as he got behind the wheel of a car marked Sheriff's Office.

The woman was human, David thought, a human being, and the sorrow he felt was for her, not for himself. It was going to be McGraw's word against his, no matter what happened, he reasoned. Not that he was thinking of the lie he could tell to get out of his admission, but he wanted time to think about what he was going to do. He didn't think McGraw would make any move until he had turned himself in, until he signed something saying he had left the scene where someone might have been hurt due to his reckless speed. He was trying to tell himself the truth, the way it was now. In a way, he had hit the woman, and he wanted to go back and pick her up. He couldn't do that, but if he could find her, he could ask her to listen to him, and he could tell her he was sorry. Murder, he felt sure, was McGraw's word. It was meant to scare him. The funny thing was it didn't, but McGraw still did.

David knew he needed help. Maybe he did need a lawyer, but he just didn't think so. What he needed first was a private detective, something as remote from his experience as a TV melodrama. What he needed was his father. Not available. He'd recommend a lawyer anyway, and in spite of what his mother had said about David's being able to talk to him, he didn't think his father would be able to listen.

He drove to school and got to see Father Moran in his office. The priest shook hands with him, not the usual start of a student interview. He knew a troubled young person when he saw one. He told David to move his chair so the light wouldn't shine in his face. "I got to thinking after yesterday's brouhaha," the priest said, "one of those what-if questions. What if, after hiding out overnight, Iscariot had showed up at the foot of the cross and said, 'Lord, forgive me.'"

David grinned. There was nothing to say and yet there was a lot. "What can I do for you, Crowley?"

"I did a bad thing, Father." David told his story, even to having thrown the condom into the wind.

The priest lifted an eyebrow. "Standard equipment," he growled. It was the only comment he made until David was finished. Then, after a few seconds of thought: "And when you find her?"

"I don't know," David said. "I just want her to know I'm sorry for what happened to her."

"Any decent lawyer would advise you against self-incrimination." "I don't care!" David all but shouted.

"By the grace of God, I'm not a lawyer," the priest said. He took the phone book from the bottom drawer of his desk. "Let's start with the nearest hospital to where this misfortune occurred."

Within the half-hour, he had the name and an address for Alice Moss. When she hemorrhaged with the miscarriage, she had taken herself back to St. Vincent's Hospital. It was where she worked, on the custodial staff.

"If you didn't hear me scream," the woman said after she'd thought about it, "how were you going to hear if something else happened to me?"

"I don't think I wanted to hear anything," David said.

Mrs. Moss scraped a bit of congealed egg from the table with her thumbnail. They sat in the hospital employees' cafeteria, where midafternoon traffic was light. She did not in any way resemble the face behind the scream. Her salt-and-pepper hair hung in a clamp at the back of her head. Her eyes were tired. She seemed confused, slow, but her question was on the mark. She twisted uncomfortably on the metal chair. "I don't like you coming to me like this," she said. "I'd just as soon never know you."

"I'm sorry," David said.

"You said that already and I believe you're telling the truth. But I think you're sorry over something I'm not real sure I feel the same way about. That lawyer got me all confused, telling me how I feel when I don't feel that way at all." She concentrated on ST. MARYS COLLEGE, the lettering on the breast of his sweater. "David—Mr. Crowley..."

"David's fine," he said.

"I'm not saying what I want to say, and maybe I should keep it to myself." She drew a deep breath and looked at him directly. "I didn't want to have a baby at all, but I'm a church person and I felt I had to go through with it. Mind, I could have been killed myself last night, I know that..."

"I do too," David said.

"And maybe that would have been murder, but I still couldn't call the other thing murder. I was thinking when I came back to work this noon: Wasn't I lucky on both counts?"

Before the next Christian Ethics class David told Father Moran about his meeting in the hospital cafeteria.

"Did she forgive you?"

"I think so."

"You're lucky, my lad," the priest said. They reached the classroom door. "I have a word of advice for you, Crowley. One word..." He waited.

"Yes, Father?"

"Abstinence."

