

WHAT THEY NEED

George Blecher

WHEN I BROKE UP our home, my daughter fled. Rings through her ears and nose; tattoos on her arms; a broad, open face like her mother's, she took off for Alaska, then Australia, New Zealand, Tasmania. She'd always loved to travel, here was her cue: I want no part of this, I'll head for the ends of the earth.

Boiling inside, my son dug in his heels. When it got too much for him, he exploded at one or both of us, but you could never predict exactly why or when. He'd lost his history book. Or he had to get the new Mario game before the software store closed, and you were slowing him down. "You're a fucking piece of shit," he'd growl under his breath, then repeat and vary it—without real pleasure—until not the words but his grumpiness got you furious and guilty. Then he'd storm into his room, slam the door and start smashing little things, like CD covers; even in his anger he was a prudent kid, which was the most worrisome thing of all.

These seemed like perfectly reasonable ways for them to express what they felt.

It was also clear that they were in mortal danger.

Before I bolted, I'd been as lazy as a border guard in a country with friendly neighbors: just keep an eye on the circle of protection. Now there was no circle, no protection.

AFTER THE DIVORCE, THEY GOT worse. My daughter managed to get through a semester in college, but the sand kept slipping from under her feet. She was a saint of the streets, bringing waifs and junkies to her off-campus apartment and stacking them high in her living room loft space so that when you visited they'd be huddled up there like obedient gerbils. She herself looked dark and restless. Now she wanted to head for Guatemala. If the trip around the world had been a lark, this one would be more hard-edged: she'd show the fuckers that she didn't need them.

My son still muttered curses that made his jaws so tight they must have ached. But his lethargy was far worse. Don't you want to do this with me? No. Can't we do this or that? No. No. No. It could have been his approaching adolescence, or the computer games that flattened his and his friends' lives. But underneath his anger, something was draining his energy away. He guarded the pain, or the pain guarded him.

In the summer I took him for a month to the cottage where my wife and I had watched the roses grow. Okay, I take total responsibility. But you can imagine that he was not very physically daring. He was scared. Or maybe—they do not cancel each other out—he just did things in his own time. But how can a parent help looking at the bicycle riders with bodies that know how to hold balance, at the child divers who leap bravely into the pool's depths, at the swimmers whose straight legs pound the water to whipped cream, and not worry about one's own? They will survive. They will fly through their lives. What does he need?

My friend kept calling. How could I leave her to take my son to the Bower of Bliss? Because I need to say goodbye to it, to the fences creaking under the weight of roses, the acres of fruit trees, sunlight through the oak leaves—the place where we planned to have swimming, diving children!

I understand. I do understand. But what about us?

A few days later my son came frowning into the house.

"I forgot how to ride my bike. But I don't need to know. Mom will buy me rollerblades in the fall."

"No she won't."

The words had put themselves in my mouth.

"Your body still knows how to ride, it didn't forget. You just have to remind it. If you don't do it now, you'll never be able to. You're almost too old."

"Thanks for sharing that. But there's no logical reason I have to."

"I want you to. I know that isn't logical. But it is simple."

"Give me logical reasons!"

He was close to cracking. How do you keep the pieces from flying apart?

"Probably it has something to do with balance and control. Hand-eye coordination. Keeping a vehicle on the road. I don't really know. Mostly it has to be done because I want you to."

"I'll call her!"

"Be my guest."

"You're a fucking bastard!"

"That's not necessary."

"But you are!"

"I happen not to be, but that's not the issue. Don't say it again."

"Fucking bastard."

His mouth was set. Quite formidable. We were standing together on a tightrope over Niagara Falls. If I reached out to comfort him, I would lose my

balance and fall. If I let my rage out, the heat of my breath would send him crashing to his death. The interesting thing about this melodrama was that it might actually be as important as it felt.

“When do you plan to practice riding the bike?”

“Saturday.”

“That’s three days from now.”

“Good adding.”

“That’s the day you’re going to Playland with your cousin.”

“Then Sunday.”

“It’s too late. Friday.”

“Sunday.”

“Either Friday, or cancel the date with your cousin.”

I actually liked this! It was stimulating, it made us nimble! Was it possible that he was enjoying it too?

“Then we have to practice down by the beach,” he bargained. “Not near the house. And you have to help me.”

There is a long, thin ribbon of a road from the house past the turnabout, past the rye field, past the yellow farm, down to the beach. In the early morning sunlight when the crows swoop down into the rye and the cows are lying in the pasture, their hides still wet with dew, even an angry, scared, self-doubting boy has little chance of falling. Along the way he rode fairly well, a little wobbly, his weight too high and centered, too separate from the bike. When he attempted a turn, he leaned too far forward, the handlebars and low front tire bearing too much weight; he swerved but managed to stay on the road. I walked behind him, aiming him at one landmark or another fifty yards away, instructing him to turn around (“No, I can’t do that”) and come back as I rolled up the ribbon of road to the beach.

At the beach a treacherous turnaround: sand piled on the asphalt parking lot. He would have to ride in sand. Skid and slip. But if he backed out now he’d have to practice on the public road where the eyes of his friends would turn him to butter.

I rolled my jacket into a lump and put stones in a course that you could say was demanding but also safe. “Practice right turns.”

He skidded and fell.

“But you were in the way! I couldn’t go out as far as I needed to! You made me turn!”

Don’t let his anxiety infect you. If it does, your guilt not your concern will be doing the talking.

GEORGE BLECHER

"Don't go so wide. You don't have to. Tight turns. Come at it faster."

He managed to ride as slowly as a circus juggler pumping the bicycle pedals back and forth while he spins plates on sticks.

"That was well done in a perverse sort of way. But you should give it more speed."

"I can't! I'll fall!"

"A little more speed."

He skidded and slipped again.

"I won't do it. I won't do anything. I'll walk everywhere." He started to push the bicycle back up the road.

"You need to learn. You can do it."

He actually turned the bike around.

Eventually, after a half hour, the practice began to take on a more reassuring rhythm; the steady crank of the pedals, the regular swish of the tires in the sand promised to keep him from falling.

"Don't look sad!" He said in the middle of a turn. "It gives me more confidence when you look happy!"

So he'd been watching me as closely as I'd been watching him. Fair enough: I demand effort, he demands good humor. But there was also benevolence in his voice: he could save my life, too.

MY FRIEND'S TEMPERATURE KEPT rising: Come home, come home, don't you and I mean anything? And I was a lawyer pleading for more time before his client goes to the chair: Just one more stay, one more appeal, this is a man's life we're talking about!

A WEEK OR TWO LATER MY SON WAS RIDING his bike several miles a day with a pack of boys turning into young men. One cloudy morning his face looked different. If I'd had time to think about it, I might have recognized it as the look of his adolescence: calm, arrogant, very beautiful. But I didn't. That was part of the tactic. He lay sprawled on the couch, thumbing through an Archie comic, and vowed that he'd never mow the lawn again.

"I can't use the machine we have. It's a piece of shit."

"You know I won't tolerate that language."

"Sorry. You always did before. But it is a piece of shit."

"You can borrow the Sugarman's."

"They need it today. They told me. Besides, I don't have to."

"It's one of your chores."

"Don't use that word. I hate it. And you're paying me so it's not a chore. It's my choice."

"It's your responsibility."

"I won't do it. I don't care about the money."

How could I not admire him? He was D'Artagnan, curling his mustache and lowering his eyelids. If I didn't think fast, I would die on my feet.

"I won't give you your allowance."

"Perfectly all right with me."

"And you can't go outside to play with your friends."

"I accept."

By what route had we entered the world of 17th century France? Finesse was blooming within him like my roses! Very soon he would pick an *Étoile de Hollande* and lay it in the lap of an admiring girl; he could do that now, he was capable of it. And he seemed to be practicing something on me—not the gift of the rose but the moment before, when he slits his rival's throat or scarf with a flick of his rapier.

"Don't move from this spot," I said. "I have to go to the store."

"Don't worry. I'll be here."

I stomped around the garden. The roses offered no comfort—they were stupidly beautiful, and I couldn't see their beauty for their stupidity; his beauty had gathered intelligence and self-confidence behind it. So this is the consequence of giving them your best: they turn it against you.

When I got back he was exactly where he said he'd be. Why not; the couch was his new home, the comforter wrapped around him all the friends he needed.

"Have you thought up new punishments for me?"

"Well I suppose I could—"

Then I heard it. It was a game, another game. It was practice, but I could have just as well been his beloved as his rival, I was both and more, a fellow Musketeer. I was in a mock duel with my son and all he was doing was asking me to play.

"—I could pull your nails out one by one."

"I mean real punishments."

"I could... insist that you cook all your meals. Our meals."

"What if I didn't?"

"You'd starve."

"We'd starve."

"I'm prepared to do that. Are you?"

"What else?"

Oh look how his cheeks are thickening, all the flesh thickening. His skin is smoother, more alluring, than it was yesterday, his mouth more sensual, his eyes filled with bright secrets. Maybe he isn't French but English; his voice has the light irony of the best of Englishmen, whose self-control is so finely tuned that neither voice nor expression betrays recognition of the game. And yet they play it, we're playing it—stiff-backed father and light-voiced son, walking together in the rose garden.

"I'd make you scrub the kitchen floor with a toothbrush."

"Oh, very World War II. What if I wouldn't do it?"

"I'd ...make you eat liver. Write love letters that you'd have to read out loud to your friends. Make sure you weren't allowed to fall asleep."

Now that he found interesting.

"But what if you fell asleep?"

"I wouldn't. I'm good. I need less sleep than you."

He thought about it.

"Could we try it tonight?" He wasn't D'Artagnan, just a curious boy.

Night. All day we've waited patiently like gladiators before a match. Night has gathered outside the windows of the cottage in unrolled skeins of black muslin.

"So what do we do?" he asks.

"First we agree that if you fall asleep before me, you mow the lawn the whole summer."

"And if you fall asleep?"

"You don't have to mow."

"I don't have to now."

"Then what do you want?"

"You have to wash the kitchen floor with a toothbrush. And mow the lawn." His smile is definitely D'Artagnan's.

As we watch TV, he sits up very straight on the couch. Gravity and fatigue elongate and refine his beauty. He doesn't talk but I can see him thinking hard. I want to comfort him yet know that that would be pure deception, a cheap way to unman him. He'd see through it immediately—"You're just calming me down so that I'll fall asleep!"—and if he didn't I'd be in real trouble, he'd hold it against me the rest of my life.

He keeps himself awake through an escape movie until one o'clock. By the end his body is softening, caving in on itself, the limbs becoming more feminine as if an inner mother is calling him down. Whenever I check, he raises his eyebrows into a bitter smile that could easily turn into rage.

"Don't smirk."

"I'm not."

He sits up hard. "Yes you are, oh yes you are, I'm going to keep talking because if I keep talking I can't fall asleep now can I, and I'm going to tell you about a lot of things, a lot of things, oh piece of shit piece of shit—"

"No cursing, okay?"

"Oh piece of shirt—" he breaks out in his peeling laugh— "yes, piece of shirt, big piece of shirt, now this big piece of shirt is the biggest piece of shirt, and the biggest piece of shirt is the smallest piece of shirt—"

He gets up, goes out to the kitchen for a Coke, starts pacing the floor in front of me. For a half hour he holds a lecture in gibberish, screwing up his face, waving his arms, changing his pace from loud to soft, fast to slow, high to low and rising again just when he seems about to fade:

"Oh yes now Daddy, I've got to tell you what's going on. You want me to mow the lawn and I hate mowing the lawn I think that mowing the lawn is dumb dumb dumb, you know what I mean dumb dumb dumb, now I'm not cursing, you can hear that can't you Dad, I'm doing exactly what you want but I'm not mowing the lawn am I oh no sirree—"

The tiredness is starting to turn into exhaustion, which could overtake him like an oncoming train: it scares me a little. Finally he sits down again in the couch. He looks quite pale.

"Now you talk. Keep me awake."

I start to tell him a joke.

"Not that. Something scary."

"Well, once there was a man who decided to torture his only son by keeping him awake—"

I turn to look at him. Miraculously, he's almost gone. "Oh, yes, that son." He smiles with his eyes closed. "Quite the little gentleman."

WHEN I GOT BACK to the city, there were signs of my daughter all over my apartment: a gnawed piece of cheese, an open organic soy milk carton, beer bottles, garbage bags full of the clothes that she buys by the pound. And dishes stacked

neatly, almost tenderly, in the drainer. Had she come for refuge or revenge? Like everything else about her, the signs were complicated, elusive: don't misunderstand me too quickly.

"How are you feeling about us now?" my friend asked me.

She was as beautiful as the future looked when I was seventeen, and she smiled at me so lovingly that I almost fainted. But the implication in her voice was accurate: I wasn't ready for her, I still had work to do.

"Oh come here. You don't have to look that guilty."

A few days later I talked to my daughter on the phone. "Have you decided what you're going to do in the fall?"

"Decided not to go back to school. First I'm going up north to pick berries, then heading to Guatemala. My friend's father's got a place down there."

"Where exactly?"

"Somewhere. I'll find out when I get there, right?"

"How will you get there?"

"Don't worry about me, Big Daddy. You know I can take care of myself."

Her voice was more impatient than defiant. The sand was still slipping out from under her feet.

She'd given up her apartment and was living in a squat that she wouldn't show me. Instead, she'd meet me with a friend in front of a good restaurant, one where they could feel for a while like young women.

At first glance you could say that they looked alike in their black undershirts and stiffly dyed hair. But the friend's appearance was a disguise. After just a moment you could see how carefully her eyebrows had been plucked, her shirt shrunk to show off her breasts. My daughter was wilder. Her natural enthusiasm was a fever; she had crossed the border into an alternative world, and with her zealot's soul had committed herself to that world completely. Her eyebrows were her own, her tattoos prominent, and her face, her arms, her forehead—all had a glow of sincerity that could make any parent love her. And want to wring her neck.

She'd brought something else wild with her. "This is Rocko, Daddy. I just got him."

The puppy—half great Dane, half pit bull—was so big that its size was a burden. Its legs went out in four different directions, and its head, half-black, half-white like the musicians in the rock band Kiss, was much too heavy for its fragile neck.

"Rocko, this is my Dad."

He opened his mouth in a yawn or dyspeptic groan.

"I think he's having growing pains. Don't worry. I'll tie him up before we go in. I'm gonna take him when I ride the rails up north. Make me lots of money for Guatemala!"

She had the first-born's need to shock, but another part of her really was over the edge into the land of freedom and poverty. She stuffed her mouth like the survivor of an ordeal, like those film characters who eat with both hands, mouth, chin and chest. It wasn't gluttony; it was filling emptiness. Did she know that I wasn't doing this to her, that she was starving herself? With her it was so hard to tell what part was masochism, what part freedom.

"Can we have desserts?"

With her eyes half-closed the friend spoke slowly, smiled at unexpected moments: her dreams were pure solipsism. Why was she here? My daughter needed warm friends! Hair flying, mouth working, my daughter talked about everything—her friends, her plans—breathlessly and a little forced:

"It's supposed to be fabulous in the mountains, I don't mean the tourist areas, I've got lots of friends who've been down there, you can live on practically nothing, everything is cool if you find the right place, the Indians will trade with you—food for clothes and batteries. And I mean you have to learn the language, nobody's going to speak to you in English so I can learn it from the inside!"

"But who are you going with? People you know?"

"Yeah, I don't know them that well, but they're cool. Kim is this lesbian chick from Colorado, and I've known Billy for like a year."

"But none of your old friends?"

"They may join up with me once I get established. Or maybe not. We'll see."

I told her about the summer. The roses. D'Artagnan. "Hey, bro, way to go!" She smiled and raised her fist. She'd stopped going to the house years before.

"You really should see it. The garden's filled out now. Everybody misses you."

"I was thinking about it. Maybe I will. Next year."

Outside the puppy howled restlessly. During the meal she got up at least five times, went outside and knelt next to it, roughing its ears, kissing its face. There, in the muted red neon street light, I saw my daughter's female softness and maternity. But then she strutted back into the restaurant with an artificial smile on her face.

While the dog led us through the streets, I kept reaching for my daughter but couldn't connect. Finally she said, "Let's sit on the grass in the square and let him

play." She lay back on the dirty grass with the giant puppy above her, putting her hand, her arm in its mouth; this was someone I didn't quite know.

"I'd like to see where you're living," I said.

"It would disturb you."

"I lived poor too."

"Yeah, but this would really disturb you. I'll call you, Daddy. I love you."

When she did call, she was quicksilver. The hurt was deeper inside her than in him, and rawer; her travels had kept it pure. The fact is that I was afraid of her anger and pain. My son could let the rage out, which was a relief; she could only run, come back, run away again.

First she called to say that she'd given Rocko away.

"I only had him a couple of weeks. Wasn't he wonderful? Oh sweet little puppy. I found a farm up here that wants him. It wasn't fair to keep him chained up all day. The people I hang out with in the squat all have dogs. But they're poorer than I am, they come from really poor backgrounds and they need the dogs to guard them. I didn't want to train him to think that way."

"You don't have to make yourself into something you're not."

"That's not what I'm saying. I'm saying that I didn't want to do this to my dog."

"Do you need protection?"

"Sometimes, yeah. But it isn't fair to him."

"Can you hear how provocative you're being? Everything you say has a double edge. Now I'll worry that you don't have a dog! Why can't you just go back to school?"

"I'm not doing this to hurt you, Daddy. You sound hurt."

"I am hurt. This does hurt."

I was not acting well. I didn't know what she needed.

The next calls were long monologues about the difficulty of the work (but she was getting better at it), how her back hurt each morning (but not by the end of the day), how much she was enjoying reading *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (but would definitely go to Guatemala in the fall). What could one say about this person? That there was a certain ambivalence in her messages? And that these mixed messages said that maybe she was desperate, maybe lost, maybe self-destructive, but maybe not? Maybe brave, brilliant, persistent, independent? And that, whatever else she was doing, this person was taking pleasure in pulling her father's chain?

AT THE END OF THE MONTH SHE SLIPPED back into the city and called me from the squat.

“Have you officially applied to college for a leave of absence?” I asked.

“Why do I have to do that now? I can do it later! I gotta get going!”

“Do it now.”

Pause. A long one. “Okay. I’ll do it now. I will.”

And then a note came into her voice that one might almost call cozening: “Dad, you remember the deposit on my apartment—that you paid for, I know. Well, I was just wondering if I could...have it for my trip. I didn’t make that much money picking berries.”

“Did the others?”

“They were better than me. Stronger. But next year I am definitely going to do it again. I can get better at it. And I don’t need that much money. We’re going to ride the rails—”

“You know I can’t stand that—”

“But you hitchhiked! This isn’t more dangerous, it’s less dangerous! The people in the yards are nice to us, they take care of us.”

She was correct about the genealogy of her desire. But I was a father now, I had my orders.

“I don’t know about the money. Mom will be back next week. We’ll talk about it then.”

“But I want to leave now!”

“Don’t leave now. Wait. Please. She wants to see you before you go.”

Whatever her travels had meant before, in the future this would be the trip she’d point to as the beginning of everything that happened afterward. So it was tricky. Delicate. And she wasn’t prepared: fragile in constitution, torn by impatience and anger, distressingly alone. The people she was traveling with weren’t old friends, they were wind! To accept that your child has not only left you but also in some way that you haven’t been aware of, lost (or cut herself off from) her beloved friends, her only moorings, with their tattoos and dreadlocks and pants falling off their hips is to allow her to be wind, too. So you think: she needs something hard, something that wind can swirl around, settle over.

Rock. You have to become a rock.

Two weeks later we meet in my ex-wife’s apartment.

For the first six months after I left her, invective poured out of our mouths like bile. How can you turn your back on us? Don’t all those years count? Yes, yes, but

where were you all those years? In your own head! For weapons she had the self-righteousness of the deserted, I the deserter's oily condescension. Both were lies, but what else could we do?

Maybe it was just exhaustion, but as time went on the recriminations diminished and something else emerged—a sense that the structures we'd built would survive even our absence. They would stand empty but not forgotten. And perhaps even be useful to others—or to us, if we let them.

For this we've spent hours rehearsing our daughter's limits. Deep down my wife wants no limits, to compensate for all the ones she thinks she had; I want a cage of rules.

My daughter comes in wearing rags. A bold tactic: hit them right from the beginning. But what is she trying to say beyond Fuck You?

Tattered, baggy pants oily with dirt. An olive-colored tanktop with a stain like Australia on the front. Clothesline for a belt. She is still tanned and healthy from the berry-picking, the color of summers when the sun baked her brown in a day. As always, her skin is perfectly tight. Her body looks lithe—her legs long, her breasts small—but slouchy: no one has loved it enough yet to make her love it. But her face! Round and mild, with golden eyes, a pug nose, a brow that opens as wide as innocence.

She curls down like a pretzel in a dining room chair.

“So, Mom and Dad, what's up?”

A look of pure sweetness. Treacherous.

Sitting at the end of the long table away from everybody, our son pretends to be sleepy and bored: the tension's too much for him. But I remember what he taught me: this is all a game. Play it with love but also with cunning. She's playing too, and she knows it. She wants the money. Fair enough. But what else does she want? Play, that's the only way to find out.

“So?”

“So big bad Daddy.”

“So, my dear. Will you promise us one thing?”

“What's that?”

“This riding the rails. It's crazy and dangerous. We don't want you to do it.”

“But I'm going to anyway.”

“Then I don't want to pay for it.”

“So you want to control me with money. Just the way your parents did.”

Oh very good playing, very good move. How proud of her I am.

"You know you're right," I say. "I don't think I'd want to pay for it even if you didn't ride the rails. School yes, but bumming around, no. Earn the money yourself."

"Then I'll have to ride the rails. I don't have any choice."

"But you were going to anyway."

Not a great move, but then this is new for me. I have not been a good father. Friendly, confusing, destructively intimate. Now I go to the opposite extreme.

"You really won't give me the money?"

"I really won't."

"And you agree with him, Mom?" Her mother looks wracked with guilt, but nods; I or who I stand for still intimidates her. "Then I have to make a phone call."

She runs into the bedroom. My ex-wife and I stare at each other, but this is the price of separateness: your guilt, sadism, misunderstood gestures of love are your own.

With combat boots and gawky knees, she stomps in and out of the kitchen. Her friend's line is busy. Finally she makes contact, talks in low, murmuring tones and comes back, looking washed out, bent.

"Sit down, doll. Can we talk more?"

"Sure. Why not." But she gulps down air as she says it.

She sits with her feet up in a chair next to her mother, wiping tears from her eyes. Then she weeps in her mother's arms.

Then we just sit.

When we were a family, everyone was always mad at someone. It was a way to keep away boredom or avoid some larger questions, such as what were we all doing there together? Better to meet this way, as strangers who happen to find themselves in the same room.

This is a lie: but to recall at the moment how much we loved each other is, like lightness of being, unbearable.

We sit listening to the pleasant click of a diner clock my wife bought me that I was too cowardly to claim. No one's going anywhere: it's too early and too late.

"Is it really so unexpected?" I finally say to my daughter.

"I'm just surprised that you don't think like I do. I used to think that you did. Completely. I thought that I was most like you of any person in this world. But now I see that I'm not. Not exactly."

"Maybe it's good to know that."

"Maybe it is. I'm just shocked."

She cries some more.

Oh she is good, not least because her sincerity and duplicity are so well mixed that even she can't tell them apart. How does one tell the posturing from the pain? Underneath the fake pain is real pain, I have no doubt of that. And she the charmer, the joined one, the child of our happiest times, must be puking with anger inside: the world that she wants so theatrically to explore—and that she refuses to see we're all exploring, willingly or not—may terrify her even more than it does the rest of us.

Finally my ex-wife speaks in a way that makes me realize that her life is just beginning. "It's dangerous to see people as exactly like yourself," she says. "I was too close to Dad, I let him do a lot of the living that I was too afraid to do. It was my mistake, not his. It's scary to feel alone, but you have to." Why couldn't I have had more of this?

What the hell. Be the hero. Play all the cards at once.

"I was the first of us to see you," I say to my daughter. "Mom was still sedated because of the caesarian. You know who you are and will always be? The baby I saw in the warmer. A big baby, ten pounds, with the same golden eyes you have now, and you were lying in the warmer moving your arms and legs in a perfectly regular rhythm, as if you were swimming or scaling a wall. You were elegant and complete. So when you puncture your face, get a tattoo, put your perfect body at risk by hopping a freight train—or when someone, including me, including yourself, lets that perfect baby down by betraying you or selling yourself short—then I want to kill them for dishonoring you.

"But I can't protect the perfect baby. I want to but I can't. All I can do is tell you what I think: not to yearn to die so quickly, to challenge yourself by doing what's hardest for you—like going after a boy you really want or a friend you really want or the prestige and power you may really want but can't admit to yourself. Charity comes easily to you, but I suspect that what you're most afraid of is ambition.

"But I don't know for sure. I don't really know you. I know the perfect baby, not you as you are now. So that's the only real service I can perform for you—to tell you that I don't know you, I don't know what's best for you, but I love you and I'm always going to say what I think and try to protect you even though I know I can't.

"Does any of this make sense?"

My son, heavy-lidded, fills the room with a yawn. My wife looks relieved. My daughter wipes tears away but stares steadily at me. She's saying that the game is far from over.

A WEEK LATER SHE INVITED me downtown. "You wanted to see where I live."

"I'd like to bring my friend," I said.

I could taste the gall in her throat. But I have a life, I have rights too.

"Sure, why not?"

"When are you leaving?" I asked her as we stood in the cold park near the squat. Autumn was starting to tighten the air.

"Sunday."

"Are your friends coming here to meet you?"

"Nah, I'm meeting them out in Denver."

"How are you getting there?"

"Don't torture yourself, Dad."

"I think I want to pay for the bus trip to Denver, okay?"

"Boy are you ever inconsistent." She winked past me at my friend, one woman to another amused by the foolishness of men. "And I don't know if I want you to... Though maybe, what the hell, it would speed things up."

She smiled a little bashfully.

"I don't know if I can do it, Daddy-O. I mean the ambition thing."

So one of those shots in the dark actually hit something. Amazing.

"Talk to me about it. Come on, walk over here."

"I have the feeling that you were right in a way," she said. "But then I have this opposite feeling that you're imposing something on me that's your trip, not mine. I tell myself that it shouldn't bother me—even though I know it does, it fucks me up too. But the worst thing is that I end up having this general feeling of guilt. Do you understand how miserable that makes me? I have the fucking guilt but no idea of what I did wrong."

"Say it without cursing. Try it."

"Stop it, Dad! I mean it." She paused. "What did I do wrong? I didn't do anything!"

She was right. In more ways than one. Now the move I'd made—the sincerity ploy—felt like the tactic of a seasoned player whose sadism isn't quite as hidden as he imagines.

"You didn't do anything wrong. I did. I didn't know myself well enough. I couldn't see what I needed."

"You're losing me, Dad. Who the fuck are you really?"

"The Lone Ranger."

"You really are, aren't you? The fucking masked man. Excuse me."

I like my kids. They get allusions. The virtue of private schools.

"Will you show me the squat?"

"Not just yet."

In the Middle Eastern cafe with waiters in cut-away tee shirts and odd narrow lines of beard, like Sumerians, she was another person—speeding, flirtatious. "Hey, what's happenin'? This is my Dad. Isn't he cute? This is his lady. What kind of soup do you have?"

One waiter, his skull brilliantly shiny, his features as beautiful as a Pharaoh's, wasn't much younger than I, but he'd made, shall we say, different choices. He grinned the tired, warm grin of middle-aged men: Hello my friend. You'll die before I will.

Did my daughter see it? Not likely. She was in her own country of self-consciousness, innocence and cruelty.

"So, Daddy-O, what are your plans for the fall?"

"Well—"

"Still figuring out your life, right? Oh, Daddy, I wish I could give you some fun! He's so serious, isn't he! You really aren't like me. I have fun doing anything, I mean anything, well not everything but a lot of things, I don't judge things the way you do, you judge things so much, you think so much, why don't you just lighten up a little, Pop, everybody really loves you."

She patted me on the cheek. Let her. Encourage her. This is what she needs. This is what you need.

From the outside, the old, scarred tenement looked no worse than the other buildings on the block. But inside, half the walls had been knocked out like a stage set of ruins. A few light bulbs lit up the place like a dim attic. The bare iron stairs went up a half floor, then turned; where they turned there was no wall, only black air. She led us up the stairs.

"Down there is where we put the garbage."

I could feel and smell—but couldn't see—the massive hole full of garbage two stories down. The smell wasn't of ordinary garbage but of snakes gorging themselves on the flesh of rotting babies.

“Why do you leave it down there?”

“We can only put it outside once a week.”

“What about rats?”

“I guess there are some. But ah don’t pay’em no mind.”

Quite a move. The Jaws of Hell Offense. Look how close I am to the edge, she was saying. Because it is partly your fault, you have no right to protest. Or was she saying that at all? Maybe she was just saying: life is very scary, I think I can survive, stand by me.

She shrugged prettily. Almost curtsyed.

What did she want me to do—bow? My friend nudged me.

I bowed.