

Gerald Lynch

The Go-Away Game

I

Diane squints at the new crossroads from behind the one narrow window of the empty classroom. It is a meeting of three roads, one of which runs past Hank's farm to her own home three-quarters of a mile from the new school. Another road, familiar, leads into the city three miles away. And the new road, black and sticky, twists around Hank's property to the new suburb of half-finished houses.

She tightens her lips and shakes her head at the city kids boarding their busses. The boys jostle each other, purposely bumping into the girls, who drop jaws and swat in mimed outrage. For once, Diane is grateful for the soundproofed room, knowing how she would simply loathe those helpless girlish shrieks.

The yellow and black busses continue inching into position like massive smoked bees sluggish to evacuate eggs from a burning hive. A few kids walk past Diane's window on their way to the new suburb, oblivious to the aloof scorn she is failing to maintain. And the go-away game, it too is failing her.

That throbbing again in her temples, the sharp pains behind her eyes. She closes her eyes and concentrates hard on the go-away game, daring the pain and failure. Her head vibrates from the effort. When she opens her eyes a slit, she can't see the new road. She smiles vengefully at this return of her waning powers. But the black road shimmers back, vanishes again, then emerges like a face from a defogging mirror. Her thumbnail splits on the new window putty. Now she'll have to cut them all, "de-claw" herself as her mother commanded.

At least the window still provides a reassuring view of Hank's old place across the new road. A reassuring view: Hank's house like a carnival's idea of horror, his sagging barn and her father's useless red elevator like a tongue from the worthless loft. Worthless because Clefton Developers had bought off the buyers to ensure that Hank's

harvest would remain unbought, left for rats. As though anyone could have a surplus of anything these days. Diane hates Clefton, and not only because she loves Hank.

Dumb old farmer, she thinks, shaking her head then pressing her cheek against the window. To the right, the tar-papered houses, as monotonous now as they would be when completed, worry her further. But she will not force the go-away game, let it gather her hidden strength. She merely stares disgustedly at the paved roads winding among the black boxes, roads flanked by ditches whose mounds sprout dusty fleabane, browning crabgrass and broken burdock, here and there the filthied white of a drooping Queen Anne's Lace. The long Thanksgiving weekend is already over, another promised completion date missed. It looks to Diane as if they're never going to finish the new suburb, though her new neighbours—the luckier ones—complain little about having to live in a skeletal community.

She brings the split thumbnail to her mouth and worries for herself. Already the novelty has worn thin, as prematurely threadbare as the bleached and patched bib overalls the city boys now like to wear. It just isn't exciting any longer being at the new school and finally taking assembly with the seniors. It's the same with the Ball as it was last June when no one asked her to the Prom. And even if she is sexy in a way that her mother calls wholesome (though her mother says attractive), it doesn't balance things. It doesn't look as if anything's ever going to change.

The only big difference so far is that Hank has surprised everyone and managed to harvest his fields practically single-handedly. There were rumours that Clefton paid some of the remaining farmers not to help him. They want his land that badly. But Diane's father got the loan of Fleming's combine and helped out on weekends. Still, that's not really the only *big* difference, it's the only difference, romantically speaking.

The goofy boys in Diane's class went after the new crop of grade nine girls like tongue-drooling mutts. They were supposed to fall over each other trying to be the first to ask her to Immaculate Conception's gala Harvest Moon Ball tonight. Why she had let herself dream they would, praying to St. Joan all summer long like some silly immature grade niner. . . . Well, it's beyond her. She's too aloof. She should know by now that beautiful legs and a sexy figure aren't enough to get immature boys to approach her for a date. She must remain aloof. It takes goofy boys time to realize that they're supposed to want what they think they can't get. Or so her mother says. "Yes, mother," she whispers to her faint reflection on the window. "They're simply *paralyzed* with respect for me."

The girls didn't even nominate me for the decorating committee, that last refuge of the wallflower. And rightly so, when you come right down to it. Could a woman who doesn't wear mascara paint an enticing poster? After all, does a T-shirt where a bra is needed suggest a sense of decorum? And now, to tip the scales against me, I'm losing my power at the go-away game.

I should be more like Hank, she determines, sucking on her thumb. I should stick to my guns and not even hope for things I don't really want, or need. If I could keep just one promise to myself the way he's stood up to Clefton and hung on to his farm . . . Well, for one thing, I wouldn't have been left standing by Pat Fletcher's locker today, cow-eyed and mooning like Hank's Selly when Pat took off after that flirt, Debbie Summers. It's bad enough that I stood there listening to Pat joke about Hank-the-hick-Burroughs (as he calls him), thinking like an absolute goof that his next breath was my invitation to the Ball. But to have to take Summers' , "Hi Di, nice leotards. Oh Pat, after assembly some of us kids are going to The Golden Hind for coffee and toasted cinnamon rolls. Coming?" Well, I nearly died inside. And Fletcher takes off after that slut without so much as a see-ya-later.

Oh, but I saw it coming, almost like I made it happen. I did. (Really, what good is it having shapely legs when you're the only fifteen-year-old woman left in the universe whose mother won't let her shave her legs, or even use Neet, and still makes her wear ankle socks over green woollen leotards?) But who needs the whole yapping pack of them? They probably think that I'm as big a hick as Hank . . . That's hard to think: "As big a hick as Hank as big a hick as Hank as big as hick a--".

Control yourself, Di dear. Don't want to be caught talking out loud to yourself. You'd better get the eggs from Hank or Mom won't even let you go to the Ball with cousin Bill, the original hayseed. He's so easy to control he makes me want to puke.

"Pa-lee-ease, Mother, I simply *refuse* to go to Harvest Moon with Billy. It's so . . . so *très cliché*."

"Young lady, don't you use that tone of voice with me or you can just as soon stay home tonight and help put up the peaches." She softened: "You sound like a disgruntled Miss Piggy." She laughed.

"Mo-ther, this is not a joke!"

So what? It is a joke. A new school. Big deal. My life's the same. I'll probably die an old maid, a scrawny old virgin like Miss Lucy in the cafeteria. . . . Was I talking out loud again? Oh, I'm a lunatic, a lunatic, a luna— Settle down, Di. Control yourself. You'd better go and sit out by the bike racks for a while and compose yourself or Hank'll take one look at you and think I'm—think you're just like all the other jumpy kids. City idiots. Hanks says that people can't be doing much better in

the city judging by the coveralls their kids wear. Big dumb farmer, he thinks that the patches on their denims actually cover holes. City idiots.

She leaves the empty classroom, goes outside and sits on the browning new sod by the freshly painted bicycle racks. Hoping to catch a glimpse of Hank before he sees her, she shades her eyes and searches his yard. But he's nowhere to be seen.

Her parents worry that Hank has been growing strange since Mrs. Burrough's death three years ago. Just that morning Diane saw her father give her mother a funny look when she reminded Diane to stop in at Hank's place for the eggs. And when her mother caught the look she twitched her nose and told Diane not to be wasting time there but to come straight on home to help skin and pit the peaches.

But what do they think Hank is? She lifts the corner of a grass mat. No roots, no wonder. What do they think I am? I'm not a child, though they still treat me like one, don't even let me drink coffee, stunts my growth. Shit, if I grow any taller I'll be able to stick the cocks on weathervanes! And Mom almost dies of embarrassment whenever I mention the bra, even though my breasts are already as big—bigger than hers. So to hell with them. Hank's the only person in the world who treats me like an equal, like an adult. I'll stay and talk to him for as long as I like.

She rolls from one cheek to the other and draws up her right knee to prop her chin. Her dress falls back, revealing legs that are long and shapely in their green woollen leotards. She doesn't think to straighten the dress, but concentrates instead on Hank's barn. He's probably in there, milking and spouting to himself about the end of the world. When he talks he refers to himself in the third person—a mannerism that drives Diane right up the wall—and always says "the world as we know it." What other world is there?

Besides, what Hank says can't hurt me. I hardly even listen to what he's saying, like when he talks about not being able to have a baby with Mrs. Burroughs. (God, if Mom and Dad knew even the half of it!) I mean, you'd have to have a dirty mind to think he was seriously suggesting something. I just like to stand there watching him work. I love the smell of the barn. For that space of time there's nothing else in the universe, no school, no Clefton, no me in a way. And when I do talk, he listens. Like when I tell him that I want to be an agriculturist when I grow up. I know he listens because he always says something sweet, like "Stick to your guns." Or that I belong here and the other kids are trespassers on what used to be the Jefferson place. Judas, Hank calls Jefferson for selling out.

He even lets me milk sometimes. I'd keep going just for that. After sitting through forty minutes of that Butch Shehan's sex-ed class at the end of every day, it's a pleasure to put on Hank's old plaid shirt and milk for a spell. I never would have believed that I'd actually miss milking, and then Dad sold Feebee.

But what's Mom so up-tight about? I'm not dumb. I know she thinks that there's something sexual about it. But that's *so* puritanical, the ultimate cliché. I mean, I've been taking sex-ed from *Mizz* Shehan for three years now. I probably know more about contraceptives than Mom It's just that I've missed the farm, the barn and the milking—all the animals, even the chores—since Dad sold our place to that fucking Clefton! Goddamned sonafafucking—Easy, ease off, Di Dear.

Diane's father still owns the farmhouse and about ten surrounding acres. But just last week she'd overheard her parents discussing the sale of the remaining property, and the house. Her father said that Mr. Clefton was ready to pay handsomely for the remaining property. For fifty thousand he could have one of the new houses on what used to be the far forty—a special consideration—and what with all the money he'd been paid for the rest of the land he could retire to Florida and not have to work another day in his life, if he didn't want to. Her mother had said that, yes, it was something to think about. But before she could give it any further thought, Diane had jumped out of bed and stomped into the living room. Trying to draw one good breath but only catching short ones, she'd lost her calculated advantage. She began screaming that she'd run away from home if they sold their home.

Her father stiffened against the back of his chair as though he'd been hit in the chest. He stared at her for a moment as if bewildered by some stranger's claim. But he set aside the dog-eared farmer's magazine he'd been reading and went to her. She flinched some because it was the first time he'd held her in a year or so. He called her baby again and told her not to have a conniption fit, that it was just idle talk, that he would never sell their home. They both looked to Mrs. Archer and waited for her nod. She set aside the new Consumer's catalogue, came over and stroked Diane's hair. Diane felt like a little kid again but didn't care because it felt good and nobody was watching anyway. Then her father started laughing, her mother laughed, Diane laughed, and laughing they felt even more awkward than when forced to laugh. Her mother tapped Diane's ass and packed her off to bed, teasingly threatening no new dress for the Ball if she didn't stop eavesdropping and go to sleep.

Even with the door closed she heard her father say, "What's got into your daughter lately?" And her mother whispered, "It's what's been coming out of her that worries me."

Still, she slept soundly that night, secure in the warmth that seeing her father laugh again had brought—the first time he'd really laughed since selling the farm and taking the job building Clepton's houses. It was the only night since school had started that she didn't have to make herself sleepy by masturbating. In the morning she realized this and sat up and yawned and stretched for a good while. She felt cleansed, no matter what her sex-ed teacher says about its being perfectly natural. It's not what Diane thinks of as natural.

And to think, she thinks, he actually thought about selling our home too! . . . Well, I haven't seen Hank so he must be in the house. A funny picture, his farm, what Mr. Grant would call anachronistic. This ultra-modern school with scarcely a window, only one long narrow one like in a dungeon in the classrooms. They claim that no windows lengthens our attention spans, makes us work harder. And this ugly box borders Hank's cornfield, not a hundred feet from his house, a house that doesn't even have running water, or an indoor bathroom. But I suppose that if there were windows, ninety percent of the kids would spend ninety percent of their time continuing the jokes about Hank-the-hick-Burroughs' leaning tower of Pisa barn, his wash-n-wear overalls, and the plaid shirt that doubles as pyjamas and dinner jacket. City idiots, moving out here to what they call the sticks. I used to be bussed to the old Immaculate Conception in the city, now the city's spilled out to here and most of the kids are bussed to the new Immaculate Conception. Wee-ird. City idiots, where the hell do they think their food comes from? Machines in grocery stores?

Once, when I was standing by the fence talking to Hank, Mike O'Reilly walked by and said, "Hey Hank, how're you *making out* with your sheep?" And Hank said, "What? You blind? You see any sheep?" Even I knew what that pig O'Reilly meant, the goof. I've even seen Debbie Summers point down to my house and say that the lightning rods were used to bring life to the Archer's monster daughter—that she still wears leotards to hide the scars where they sewed her shins to her knees! Then the slutty streak of misery said that her old man owned a house like ours before he got a job. I nearly died inside, standing there not three yards behind them. But then Pat Fletcher said he'd bet I was a good lay with those muscular thighs, that I had a pretty foxy body and he wouldn't throw me out of bed for eating crackers. And even though it was sort of forward of him, I felt a feather's tickle in my stomach, just thinking about it. I mean, being a good egg and all that and eating crackers in bed with Pat. So, I didn't make a scene, just snuck into school unnoticed. I thought about Pat the next few times I did it to myself . . . But forget about that, Di dear. If you don't go see Hank right now you won't have any time to talk to him.

The road changes from asphalt to gravel when it crosses Hank's property line. The grass alongside grows tougher, the kind that either cuts noticeably when touched or secretly slices fish gills into fingers. Diane is careful not to step on the blades of grass that grow through the white dusty gravel. She has been ever since she cried inside when Mr. Grant recited the poem about the graveyard and the flowers that wasted away unnoticed in deserts. Every black tar-papered house of the unfinished suburb already has a sick maple sapling tied to a bumpy iron pole in the front yard dirt. Hank believes that those houses won't weather fifteen years, which is fine by him because he figures the world isn't going to last that long anyway. He says you can worry the world for only so long before she wastes away.

Hank's fence is down along the front, though the gate is still wired shut with a closure hanger. Just a short walk from the school, from what Hank calls "the building of higher ignorance," and soon Diane feels quiet, calm as she steps daintily across the prone fence and into a barnyard alive with stealthy cats and rooting pigs and scratch-dancing chickens, a yard littered with the rusted teeth of upside-down harrows and spreaders raking the air, outhouses flat on their backs, a yard mined with mires of steaming piss and shit. In the school she moves ponderously, bumping into suddenly jutting desk corners, or spilling her square-piled books into the hall like locker guts when she attempts to touch up her hair in the pink plastic mirror inside the door. But in Hank's yard she almost feels graceful, more at home than she has felt recently in her real home. She thinks of shit as manure, doesn't mind the smell, knowing full well that the kids at school would have been friendlier this year if she hadn't been seen leaving Hank's dungyard so often, shit and straw and mud pasted to her shoes. And they would have been friendlier, she'd be going to the Ball tonight with a real date.

"Hank?" As usual the door's wide open to the world. "Hank?" He's probably out in the barn, but better to check inside first, just to make sure he isn't lying dead in front of the radio, as Mom always say's we'll find Hank one day. If only I could be more like Hank. Speak with my own voice instead of that lunatic's words that come from I don't know where whenever I open my mouth around the other kids. Even when I'm alone lately.

A lighted bare bulb, a ramshackle of peeling wallpaper, filthy dishes piled by the rusted pump, an empty whiskey bottle toppled on the table, and beside it a picture of Mrs. Burroughs. Oh God, no, she sighs and shakes her head. Hank's on his annual bender-wake.

Once a year Hank goes over to the Archer's with a bottle, gets pissed to the gills and bemoans the loss of the greatest woman who ever lived, Mrs. Burroughs. And it's that time again, only it looks as if her father

brought the bottle to Hank this year. Diane knows that the sickest sight in the world is Hank drunk, uncontrollably drunk, crying like a big helpless baby in his drink, then passed out and slumped over the table. If there is a sicker sight, it's when he slinks back the next day, tail between his legs, worrying his engineer's cap in both hands, apologizing until he's tongue-tied, his shame at the "little one's having seen Hank behave so." The third person doesn't help.

And there's Hank's old smelly shirt on the mounted antlers, which she's sure are fake, either that or bought. If he's out trying to milk in that condition she'd better help, Diane knows that what Hank needs is for someone—a strong woman—to take control of his life.

She goes out the door singing a song from a TV show: "Wonder woman, wonder woman . . ."

II

Excepting his annual binges over at our place, the only time I can remember Hank losing control was on the hunting trip. (I'll just look around the back of the barn first.) Mom was dead set against me going hunting, but I cried and kept whimpering that Dad had promised I could go when I turned ten. So Mom finally gave in. I seldom cry but I know when it'll work.

Mom and Mrs. Burroughs packed this gigantic picnic basket and me and Hank and Dad set out before sunrise. We walked into the woods until the dew was burned off the grass. That's the woods that began where they're building the West End Mall. We didn't see anything but a few squirrels and muskrats. I was getting impatient for something big to shoot at because they'd promised me that I could have the first shot. I thought they meant it, too, though I worried about the way they kept winking at each other when I reminded them. We stopped to eat in a clearing just when the pale moon was disappearing.

I was laying everything out perfectly when a fawn stuck its head out from behind some evergreen bushes not fifty feet away. I tried to grab Hank's rifle but he put it behind his back. I started screaming that they had promised me the first shot, but Hank kept fending me off with his big hands. He and Dad roared. When I looked back to where the fawn had stood, I caught the hindquarters of a doe galloping into the bush. I just stood there trying my hardest not to cry, my throat all lumpy, hating Dad and Hank, but most of all Hank.

They ribbed me all through the meal but I didn't say a word. I couldn't speak or eat. My throat felt as dry and narrow as a piece of straw. After everything was packed into the basket, Hank pulled a bottle of whiskey from his big coat pocket. He sliced the seal with his gross thumbnail and held the bottle towards me: "Here, sweetheart,

Hank will let you take the first *shot* . . . like a man!" And with that he and Dad started laughing uncontrollably again.

I didn't cry, though it drove me crazy having the wool pulled over my eyes like that. I sat on the ground at a good distance from them and closed my eyes. My head vibrated. It was when I opened my eyes that I first realized I possessed the secret power of the go-away game. They didn't die, though. They got stinking drunk and lost their minds. Dad bragged that he was going to buy the Herndon place. Hank bragged that he'd soon be needing the land where the new school now sits, what with another mouth to feed.

At about three in the afternoon, the bottle empty, they lay flat on their backs and fell asleep, or passed out. I felt so cheated that I got up and decided to go home. When I turned to leave I spotted antlers at the same spot in the brush. Not a fawn or doe this time, a full-grown buck. He stood like an idiot just watching us, as if waiting for an invitation to join us. I willed him to stay and he bowed to chomp some leaves.

Moving as quickly and as quietly as I could, I returned to where they were sleeping and ever-so-gently slipped Hank's rifle from under his leg. I sighted the buck's head along the barrel and started walking towards him, the gun against my shoulder, my finger on the trigger, repeating to myself, squeeze it don't jerk it, squeeze it don't jerk it. When the buck's mouth froze in mid-munch I squeezed the trigger. I dropped the rifle and went reeling backwards and fell on top of Dad, who was already jumping to his feet and shouting, "What the hell!" Hank was halfway to the buck, which was down on its buckled forelegs, head propped by its antlers, snout nuzzling the earth. It keeled over before Hank reached it and started making this crying sound, just like a baby.

Dad kept shouting like a raving lunatic, "It was loaded? It was loaded? . . ."

But I felt great as Dad and I ran across to Hank and the buck, like I was floating. Just the slightest crooking of my finger could do that. I could see Dad and Hank—the big men—dying of embarrassment when I told everyone that I'd done the hunting while they were helplessly drunk.

Hank was on his knees, delicately turning the filthy snout in his hands to examine the wound in the buck's neck. Blood oozed into the ground then spouted like a fountain when the wound was freed. Shaking his head and breathing like someone about to have a connip-tion fit, Hank slid one of his big hands under the buck's head and stroked the nape of its neck. Its hind legs quivering like a dead frog's when you shock them.

Hank went back and got his rifle, returned and shot the buck in the head, right between its open vibrating eyes. Dad staggered off and threw up behind a tree. When Hank turned to me I was crying uncontrollably. He began crying silently, too—for the stupid deer, I think. That was when I fell in love with Hank. I think I was crying because I realized that I'd just fallen in love. I had promised myself that I didn't want anything to do with goofy boys, or love. And there I was at ten years old, madly in love with an older, *married* man, and a man who cried like a woman at that. And there were Mrs. Burroughs and the unborn—the first victims of the go-away game.

(Now that's funny. Where could he be? The lights aren't on in the barn, but he's got to be in there. He'd never leave the barn door open. And listen to all that barking. Hank's black mongrels going crazy about something. Ah the smell! Breathe deeply, Di dear. The milking stool toppled beneath Selly, her udder full and looking sore, poor thing. What are those mutts going nuts about at the loft ladder? . . . Good God! I know! He's drunk and sleeping it off in the loft. And the dogs are trying to tell him they're starved, or something.)

"Hank?" This is going to be funny. "Hennn-reee!" What lungs! What a voice! I wouldn't be at all surprised to find Dad up there with him, both of them drunk as skunks. But no, Dad would never have let Hank try to milk in that condition. So, Hank must have gone it alone this year. Another tradition shot to hell. "Hennn-reee! Where are the eggs, dear?"

III

Blood, I never knew there would be so much blood. Butch Shehan left that part out. I knew it was supposed to hurt at first. But I never knew it would feel so good after a while. I know I shouldn't have done it. No, I don't know that. I couldn't have stopped myself anyway. It was like I was drunk when I raised my head above the floor of the loft and saw him lying there stark naked, his thing limp and cradled in his big hand. Everything changed. Just like that. I lost control. Yes, that's it. Like I was drunk and out of control.

I should have backed down the ladder and gone straight home. But when he opened his bleary eyes and said, "Alice, dear, dear Alice," I went to him, the poor dear, he looked so helpless. And when he reached up under my dress and touched me and said, "Are you coming to bed, dear Alice?" I dropped down beside him and laid my head on his chest. I heard his heart as though in a dream or at a great distance. His hands were so soft on my hair and the nape of my neck, so gentle up and down my back. I just went crazy with love. I couldn't control it and I didn't want to.

I took off my clothes and just lay there beside him. I think I cried a little. I was so gone I hardly knew what I was doing. It felt like there was a big white feather inside me running from my throat to my crotch, felt like it was turning very slowly, twirled still like pictures of the Milky Way. I knew then that I was going to do it to him. I didn't care who he thought I was. I wasn't me anyway.

His hands were rubbing me all over, so my hands started doing the same to him. He said, "And when he grows . . . we'll make this place pay . . . or girl, a help to you"

I was up in the rafters looking down, saw my body lie on top of him for moment, then roll off and lie by his side.

With his eyes shut tightly he rested on all fours above me: "Sure it's safe? . . . Not too far along?" He tried to put it in but kept missing.

I came down and let my hands reach and take hold of it. It felt three times bigger than it looked in the sex-ed diagrams, at least three times. It went in a little ways and I choked a scream. I wanted to stop right then because it hurt so much. But once it was in he started moving it back and forth, mindlessly, like a machine. It began to hurt less. It began to feel good, then so good that I was angry when it went soft and he stopped. He rolled off and lay flat on his back, his eyes still closed. I knew he hadn't finished and I wanted it to last just a little longer. So I shook his shoulder.

He sputtered then whined, "Dear Alice, dear, dear . . . when are you coming" His eyelashes batted like the teeth of a mower: "Archer girl? . . . such a help to you since Hank"

I got madder and began shouting that Alice wanted it to last longer. Forget the fucking Archer girl! Just a little longer, *please*, before it's all over.

But I was too late. He started snoring like a power saw. I'm always too late for everything. I got up and started dressing, afraid that I'd now be too late for the Ball.

That's when I noticed the blood smeared down my thighs. I got scared. I hurried down the ladder, left the barn and ran to the dead centre of the new crossroads, the stink of Hank's shit and piss swamps caught in my nostrils. I stood there in a panic, staring at the rising harvest moon and trying to get control of myself. I willed myself to see the moon the way it looks at the beginning of those stupid werewolf movies, emerging from behind wispy clouds, a pure white ball dripping blood. I concentrated hard on the go-away game, but the full moon just hung there like a big stupid smile button. It seemed so near that I could reach out and scratch it. But I couldn't. I couldn't do anything any more. I could hardly breathe.

I started walking to my house. The nearer I got the more I hurried, until I was running. It wasn't until I stood outside our screen door that I realized I'd forgotten my green leotards. Good riddance, I grinned, then started screaming. I kept screaming that Hank had raped me. I completely lost control and passed out.

I'm in perfect control now, though. Am I ever! Don't worry about me. The go-away game is again working like a charm. And I'm not the most popular girl at school . . . though I'm not back at school yet. Still, just about all the kids have been up to visit me. Yesterday, a small intimate party organized by Pat Fletcher right here in my private room, a sort of send-off affair, *très chic*, as Miss Piggy would say. Pat looked meanly at Mike O'Reilly when he asked me how's life on the funny farm. That almost ruined my get-well party. That O'Reilly—*très gauche*! I patiently explained that I stopped the bleeding myself by ignoring the doctors and obeying the messages. O'Reilly pursed his lips at Debbie Summers, twirled a finger at his temple and called her cuck-oo. Pat took him out into the hall and told him to leave because it was my party and he shouldn't be flirting with that slutting cunt.

I told Dr. Clayton that I'd stopped the bleeding and he promised me that if I'm good at the new hospital in St. Thomas I'd be out in no time! How he found out that it was me who caused that filthy pisspot washer to catch herpes . . . Well, it's beyond me. Or that it was my power that made the newspaper fall out of Dad's back pocket so I could read what they did to that pervert, Hank-the-hick-Burroughs . . . Beats me. And my go-away game that caused the pervert to kill himself in the funny farm they carted him off to . . . Proof of my power? Well consider this: I had the crazy shit-farmer hang himself with his own filthy clothing!. . . Ah, but the newspaper gave me no credit. It talked about me without even mentioning my name, as though I was a child who needed protecting. I hope at least that the people who move into the new houses Clefton builds on the pervert's old stinking farm give me some credit.

But it's such a lonely responsibility, my power, such a burden. I can't risk sleeping at night, can't allow myself the luxury of the small white pills those nosey nurses force on me. Such a responsibility. I just lie here staring at the moon, straining to catch its waning messages, knowing that if I close my eyes for even a split second it will come crashing its high whiteness all over the world, on all that was mine, all that I love.