

Sonny

Sonny drove the van into the parking lot of the apartment complex on the highway. He drove around the lot until he found the right door, and parked close to it. The people he was moving were a few years older than him, a married couple.

As soon as he walked in the door of their apartment he knew that it would not go well. The husband and wife had been fighting. They had not finished packing. And they were upset when they realized that all they were getting was Sonny, when they thought they had hired a large truck and a crew of three.

Sonny showed them the invoice and got them both to sign it. Then he went over to their refrigerator and put his hands on the door as if he'd pick it up right then and carry it away. He let go of it and opened the door and looked inside. "This going?" he said. The wife shook her head and Sonny started to feel a little better. Three trips in the van, maybe four.

The wife had been packing up the silverware drawers, wrapping spoons and forks in sheets of newspaper. She'd been crying. Her face and arms were smudged with newspaper print, but she did not seem to know this. "I'm sorry we're not ready," she said.

"That's OK," said Sonny. He went out to the van for the quilts and dolly. Yesterday afternoon he had tried to pick up a woman at the movies. It was a theater that showed reruns. The film he went to was *Platoon*. He had seen it twice before. He knew that for a couple of hours he would be guaranteed not to think about his life. He sat near

the front where some Vietnam vets were, not quite with them, but close enough so he didn't look alone.

All through the first hour of the movie Sonny had the feeling that someone behind him was watching him. Someone was boring into him almost, and when he finally turned around he saw that a woman with a pale and serious expression was staring at him from a few rows back. She was thirty, thirty-five. She was alone; there was hardly anyone else there. His first thought was that the woman was a friend of his wife's, sending hate thoughts his way; but then he shifted in his seat and turned around again and met her eyes. He'd never seen her before. Every time he looked around again, four or five times in the next twenty minutes, there she still was, staring and almost smiling at him. He got up and went up the aisle. She looked up and smiled just as he passed her row. He went into the lobby. He had the sense that something was about to happen to him that would change his whole life. He felt this with a sudden quiet certainty—didn't people fall into the arms of chance all the time?

The only thing he had to write on was his invoice pad. He tore a sheet off and wrote his name and phone number. He couldn't think of anything else to say so he left it alone. He went back into the theater. He hadn't thought about this part, and couldn't figure out if he should leave the piece of paper on the seat beside her or tap her on the shoulder and hand it to her. In a spasm of clumsiness, he ended up leaning over, and it fell from his hand to her lap. In the blue-gray shadowy light he saw the woman pull back with fright and surprise. He saw the pinched white outline of her face, the round O of her mouth, as if he had dropped something alive on her. She cried out, so that everyone turned around and looked at them, "What's this! What do you think you're doing!"

Sonny turned and ran up the aisle. He ran out to the sidewalk and gulped in great breaths of air. The van was parked at the curb, and as he made his way to it he wondered if people who were losing their minds ever knew it, or if it was something visible only to other people, and you had to be told.

Now he said to the wife, "I gotta call my boss. Is your phone still plugged in?" She pointed to where it was, on a table in their den. Sonny dialed Debby's number at work. "Balvin Insurance," said a voice. Sonny cupped his hand at the mouthpiece.

"Debby Padgett please," he said quietly.

"I'm sorry, but there's no Debby Padgett here. There's a Deb Maitland. Do you mean Deb Maitland?"

"Who's this? Marlene? Listen, this is Sonny. I want to talk to my wife."

"I know who you are, Sonny. Don't hold this against me, OK? But if you call, I'm supposed to tell you she's out on a break or something."

"She's right there, isn't she," said Sonny. "Is she right there beside you? Tell her it's her brother. I only want to talk to her for a second."

"She's not here. I wouldn't lie to you. You still there?"

"Yeah," he said.

Marlene said, "This is probably not the right time, but what the hell. You want to meet me for a drink sometime? Not around here, it's too crazy. You want to come over to my house sometime? You don't have to worry about Billy, if that's what you're thinking. We broke up. I always put my kids to bed real early, and I always have food in the house. Don't you think it's a little weird that everyone we know is breaking up?"

"Uh, Jesus, Marlene," said Sonny. "I'm at work."

“I don’t know, it’s no big deal,” said Marlene. “I mean, it’s not like you’re letting me down or anything.”

“I gotta go,” said Sonny.

He hung up the phone and the wife said, “Is everything OK?”

“It’s great,” he said.

Between runs to the couple’s new house in town, Sonny decided to drive downtown and see if Debby was taking her lunch break at Al’s or Burger King or the pizza place. He parked the van on the corner near Al’s and left the lights flashing. Al’s was small. Every seat at the counter was taken, and all the tables along the side were filled. When Sonny walked in, it seemed to him that most of the conversations stopped abruptly, like something dropped into water. “Black coffee to go, Al,” he said.

He drank a little standing up and left most of it on the counter. Sonny’s boss was Al’s brother in law, so there wasn’t any charge, but Sonny put a dollar down anyway. “How’s it going, Son,” said Al. “You hanging in there?”

“Yeah,” said Sonny. Deb wasn’t here. Sonny didn’t understand how all these people, hanging around eating and making small talk again, looked like they were going through their lives very smoothly, as if nothing was wrong with them, when if they all told the truth for a moment they couldn’t be much better off than he was, with prongs of loneliness sticking out through his skin, and the feeling that anything good that would ever take place must have already happened.

“Hear business ain’t too good,” Al said.

“Sucks, if you really want to know,” said Sonny. “No one’s hardly moving anywhere.”

Al leaned on the counter and said in a lower voice, “I hear they’re bidding for removal at the Grains. You might go down there. I could get you guys some work there, there’s this Polish lady I know.”

“We’re not moving no trash, Al,” said Sonny.

He turned to go and a man at the other end of the counter called out, “Hey, Son.”

It was Jackie DiTullio, who lived a few houses down the street in Sonny’s old neighborhood. “Hey, Jackie,” said Sonny.

“I drove by your ma’s this morning. She’s been trying to call you. She wants you to come over. Something’s fucked with their cable and they can’t get the TV Guide station.”

Sonny said, “Yeah, OK.”

“You back with your wife, or what?” As he said this, Jackie made a circle of his thumb and forefinger and poked it.

“Put a bag on your head,” said Sonny. He went out and walked down the block. She wasn’t in the pizza shop. He felt sure he was going to see her, because he willed it so strongly, and he kept looking into parked cars and all the cars that drove by. He thought she must be zeroing in on him, hovering nearby somewhere like a balloon at the end of a string with her face drawn on it.

When Sonny was a boy, his mother earned money by taking care of babies. She took in maybe three or four at once, between the ages of a few weeks and the time they

started walking. They always stopped coming before they were toddlers and could shoot away from her grasp to other rooms. She kept them mostly in the kitchen. The house was on the road to the cereal mill, and the babies belonged to neighborhood women who worked there. They came around to the house in the morning, and Sonny went out and waited for them. The women who worked as grain handlers came dressed for the mill, in loose white cotton shifts and hairnets. It didn't matter to him that he saw them all the time in their ordinary clothes, sweeping porches and driving cars, with makeup on, going past him like he wasn't there. Early in the morning when he waited by the trees near the kitchen door, the phantom women came down the muddy lines of the flower beds, and he would feel the upward tilt that his heart made as he went to meet them. Good morning, Sonny! Good morning, Mrs. Dawson! Good morning, Mrs. Lindquist! And he would try to touch some part of their clothes for luck. All through the day they would rise and bob at the back of his mind.

As for the babies in the kitchen, crawling around with their mouths always open, with their bath things and changing things, the smooth sweet look of their skin, the mechanical swing and the playpens and all the teething rings, the close funky smell of their bodies and shit, he get snapped at and yelled at for going near them. He was not allowed to touch them, ever, like he was some kind of clod, like in his basic self, he was dangerous.

He left the van there it was, walked down to the Burger King, and ate lunch there. Then he walked back to the van in a leisurely way, and it surprised him that Debby wasn't sitting there waiting for him. She still had a set of his keys. He had thought he would find her slunk down in the passenger's seat, smoking his pot, ready to take him back.

Suddenly, he hated her for something she said once. They were newly married; his mother still had babies. He took Deb to visit her in the middle of the day. She was giving baths. She held up a wet baby above the sink, with dirty dishes all around, and Deb had looked at her with horror. Later that night he heard her talking on the phone to one of her friends. “You wouldn’t believe it,” she said. “My own mother-in-law, and it was just like a smokehouse in there, with these pink baby hams all over the place. Poor Sonny!”

He parked the van in his parents’ driveway. Since he married Deb and moved out, his mother had developed some habits that struck him as peculiar, but they weren’t as strange as some of the things he had observed in other retirees as he bundled up their lives and moved their furniture, or helped move their stuff into storage, and they squabbled about the bill, and would kill him, just take out a knife from one of the boxes and kill him, if he didn’t knock an hour or so off the total, and charge less on account of their age, their crabbed-up bitter old age, like it was all his fault. But when Sonny walked behind them in slow steps, down the path from the house they were leaving, with everything they had in his van, they were as timid and frail as small birds.

Sonny’s mother came to the door to meet him. She was wearing a pair of plaid Bermuda shorts, wool socks that went exactly to the middle of her knees, a fisherman-style canvas vest with a lot of pockets, a pair of brown leather shoes with tiny tags that said “Rockport.” Under the vest was a turtleneck jersey she must have bought at a yard sale, from the bureau of some twelve-year-old girl. It had faint purple tulips on it, faded and bleached from washings.

She was always dressed like someone about to go walking in woods alone. The other strange thing about her was that she was a small woman but she didn't seem to be shrinking as she aged. Every time he saw his mother he expected to find her a few inches shorter, but it seemed that the opposite was happening. It wasn't that she was expanding, but Sonny had the sense that, with the gray-white shock of her hair, which she never tied back anymore, she was larger than he'd thought.

He wondered if this was something he imagined because he wouldn't be able to stand it if she slowed down and looked diminished—not his mother, not now, when Debby had left him.

There were seedlings in Dixie cups all over the kitchen counters. The frying pan on the stove was covered in a thin white layer of grease. Near the sink were the remains of lunch: canned corn and brown-'n-serve sausage patties and the outer leaves of something that looked like lettuce, but it wasn't very green. How could he tell his mother that the sight of it turned him stony with fear, that she was not to go far from the house, and must stay away from the woods, and never pick anything wild and eat it, because, she might pick something wrong, some mushroom, some poisonous spore, some plant that would keel her right over?

He said to her, "Everything OK with Dad?"

"He's asleep on the couch. Don't go in there. Don't wake him."

"You ain't had the TV Guide channel?"

She turned on the tv and the screen of that channel was blank. "How are we supposed to know what's on?" she said. "Why should we spend money to buy the TV Guide magazine when we got it for free with the cable package?"

“They must have gone digital,” said Sonny. “I think you have to upgrade with a box.”

“Upgrade will cost us more. Your father said we don’t need it more of a package than what we got.”

“Well, tell him I’ll go out to the mall tomorrow and buy a box. I think they’ve still got them at Radio Shack.”

“How much?” said his mother, her eyes bright.

“I don’t know. It’s no big deal, I’ll take care of it.”

She started to walk over to the counter where her purse was. “I’ll give you a few dollars for gas,” she said.

“I’m out of here, Ma,” said Sonny.

It had started to rain. When Sonny pulled off the highway again, the last thing he expected to see was the couple he was moving, on the sidewalk, but there they were, by the door of their building, in the drizzle, with cartons of their things all around. The wife waved at Sonny. The husband was holding one of their kitchen chairs. He had just carried it from the apartment. He looked at Sonny as if he wanted to throw it through the windshield.

Sonny pushed his ash tray shut. He had smoked a small part of a joint on the way. He was a little high, but he was OK about driving; he was used to it.

He drove up alongside them. He rolled down the window and said, “I tried to call you but they shut off your phone.”

The wife walked over to the van. Sonny couldn't tell if she smelled the pot. She didn't seem to, but he still felt nervous. The only time he was busted, he'd been alone, in his car. The police pulled him over. They burned a light in his face and took the six-pack he had on the back seat, plus the beer in his hand. In his glove compartment they found a baggie with seeds and part of a joint, but just ignored it. He knew they had let him off easy because he'd just finished high school. They gave you two or three years to settle down before they busted you for real, and the first thing they asked was, "Are you married?"

"The phone's off?" said the wife. "But I just got done talking to my sister."

"I had a flat," said Sonny. "On the road near your new house."

He had only this last run to do. After that, he didn't know. Going home by himself was like going home to a hole. The apartment was the one he had lived in with Debby for six years, but her smell was gone. There was no trace of her anymore in a towel or pillow or blanket or sheet.

He got out of the van. He said to the couple, "If you pay me now, I won't have to come back."

They paid him in cash. Most of it was small bills. The husband handed over the money very slowly from a roll of bills in his hand. He must have had several hundred dollars. He said, "I don't want to give you a hard time about this, but I'm not too crazy about tipping people when the service isn't up to par, if you get what I mean."

"Hey, that's not a big deal with me," said Sonny.

"He had to change a flat tire," said the wife. As the husband paid Sonny, she stood next to him and watched. She was counting along. Her lips were mouthing the

numbers. The husband looked at her and frowned, and in the pause, Sonny saw his opportunity. The next bill the husband would peel off was a twenty. Sonny said in a low voice—just a mumble, behind his teeth—“I hope you didn’t rob no toll booth.”

“What did you say?” said the husband. Distracted, he handed the next bill to Sonny without looking at it. The wife hadn’t seen it, either, and Sonny started clowning around. He acted as if the weight of all the bills the husband was giving him would break his hand. He made like he’d drop the money, then he quickly slipped the twenty below a single.

“Did I just give you a one dollar bill?” said the husband. “Yeah,” said Sonny. He held it up. The husband just blinked, so Sonny had his tip. “We haven’t had this money cash on us at once since the day we got married,” said the wife. She looked at Sonny. “Are you married?”

“I sure am,” said Sonny. He and Debby had held their wedding reception at the Holiday Inn on the highway. When it was over and they came out again to the limousine--or staggered out half blind, at least on Sonny’s part, for he had gotten, without meaning to, incredibly drunk--they saw that the big sign in front had been altered. At the start of the reception it had said, “GOOD LUCK DEBBY AND SONNY.” Someone had changed the first letter of “Luck” to an “F,” and she burst into tears. Was that it? Should he have gotten a ladder from somewhere and changed it back?

All through the spring one year, when Sonny was almost four years out of high school, he had the feeling that Debby was drifting toward him, at parties and bars around town. Most of their friends, and nearly everyone they’d gone to school with, had moved

away or had disappeared into houses and had families. There had never been a time when it suddenly came to him that he loved her. But sometimes when he was looking across a room at her, or across a bar, he had the strange feeling that if he and Deb got up and started walking toward each other, they would pass through each other in a certain way, with a feeling of lightness, and a prickliness, the way fireflies swarm trees and then you can't see any branches.

One night when Sonny was hanging around the back room at Quill's, Joey Quill, the bartender, came up to him and said, "You better see what's up with your girlfriend, Son. I shut her off. She don't look so good."

It was summer. The bar was crowded and hot. The back of Sonny's shirt was like a clammy extra layer of skin. It was almost too dark inside the bar to see faces. But Deb wasn't here. He put his beer on the counter and went outside.

He looked for her in the parking lot. In the heavy, hazy air, with the night sky dropped low, people were walking here and there in aimless small groups, or in couples. He looked over the tops of the cars. His guess was that if Deb had flipped out, or if she'd gotten too drunk, she would have gone somewhere *up*. She would have climbed up on something. This was something he felt he knew about her.

He looked up through the trees. There was treated dope going around. It put an opium-like glaze on things. One night when Sonny was sitting at the bar, the wall in front of him began to melt. It wasn't anything he couldn't handle. But two wood panels of the wall had split open, and Sonny had the urge to crawl under the bar and lie there as still as a napkin.

"Here I am," called Deb, in a small, sad voice.

She was standing on the side of the building on a grassy little hill above the parking lot. She was drunk, but at least she wasn't crying. She leaned against Sonny so her head was tucked under his arm. He liked that.

"Did you smoke any shit tonight?" said Sonny.

Deb shook her head.

"What's the matter?"

She didn't answer. She pressed herself against him a little harder. They hadn't made love yet. But Sonny knew that they were getting close. When he thought about how it would feel with her the first time, he hoped it would be furious and quick and startling, like two raccoons.

Deb had a job at a dry cleaner's then. It was an isolated place at the lower end of Main Street, with a plate glass window. Sonny drove by now and then, at every chance he could, and if the glass wasn't fogged, he saw Deb at the counter as she talked to a customer. Or she stood by the cash register, staring out with a blank expression. Sonny imagined himself quietly going in there, past the pressers and tailors. He'd go in on his knees if he had to. Deb wore tight jeans to work, but Sonny dressed her in his mind in loose flowered long skirts like the hippies used to wear. He'd lift up the skirt and get under it, with the van still running outside.

"Come on, Deb, I'll walk you home," he said.

She made a whimpering sound against him like she hated the thought of moving. "Haven't you got your car?"

"No, sweetie," said Sonny. He was glad she was too drunk to notice it. It was sitting not fifty feet away in the parking lot. He drove an old white Corvair then.

He didn't want Debby in his car. The floor on the passenger's side was rusted. Some of it had fallen away, and he was seized with the fear that she'd step down too hard on the mat and her feet would go through, and then the rest of her would slip away also, into some big sucking thing below them like a vortex, and he would lose her forever. Was that love?

He returned to Burger King for supper. There was a pay phone near the door. He couldn't stop himself; he went over to it. Anyway, there was a woman at the counter who had waited on him at lunch, and he didn't feel like having her recognize him.

Should he call her? She was staying at her mother's. No, wait. Not "staying." She'd moved in there. She had told him she used to love him but it had died. She had picked up a bag she had packed. He had seen the way she held it near her chest, like a shield. "We're breaking up?" he had said, and she had nodded. "I am very, very unhappy, Sonny," she had said. "I never would have thought that I could feel so disappointed."

He picked up the phone, looked at it. He hung it back up. The woman who had been there at lunch had gone into the dining room to clean it. Someone else was at the counter. Sonny went over and ordered take-out.

He drove the van to the back of the parking lot, away from the lights, and ate quickly. The rain had stopped. He was glad it was too foggy to see the sky. It was still a winter sky. It was still just Orion up there, night after night, silver and hollow and massive. All he had to do was think of those words of hers, "I am very, very unhappy," and he was crouched like a dog again at the end of their couch, watching her leave him.

He opened the door and poured out the Coke he had bought. He balled up his trash and went over and threw it in the bin. He got back in the van. No streamers of moonlight came down. It was dark; it was well after twilight. He unlocked the glove compartment and took out a joint of some mild old homegrown he had, and smoked half of it. He slid down in the seat and held up the joint like a cigarette. He looked up at the night and the fog through the steering wheel. Somewhere, the world was tipping on its axis toward spring, but it didn't feel like that here.