

# Off

**Jonathan Nehls**

**Paul Brake squints through the prickle of late afternoon sun,** needling over the Front Range. It's Friday, payday, and like every Friday, he needs the money. He's a month into a deck project, a wraparound deck that overhangs the patio of a walk-out basement. He looks to the deck, ignoring the man next to him, whose toe scrapes at the gravel. The deck limps to one side. The human eye, Paul knows, can see an imperfection as small as one thirty-second of an inch. Now touch can sense an imperfection down to a thousandth. He feels his hip. He shifts his weight and clutches his thigh. Thinks of the pebble there grinding between bone like a mortar and pestle, but the bone too soft, too brittle.

Aaron Skeens, the house owner and his employer, stands next to him with his arms crossed, toeing gravel. He looks at the deck and then at his foot. He holds his hand up and shades his eyes and tilts his head as if to gauge the line of the deck's beam. On the horizon, the Flatirons are in shadows—the view Aaron described to Paul when he contracted him. The vista, Aaron claimed, it's just beautiful, he meant, so beautiful, he worked his whole life for it—little more than ten years, if Paul had to guess. They stand with their backs to the vista, their backs to the fourteenth hole of Legacy Ridge, the immaculate fairway sloping up to Aaron's property.

There have been some problems with the project, a number of problems. And today the deck's skeleton is up, but it seems to angle off to one side, off level, and Aaron Skeens goes on with his misgivings, his arms and hands flitting about.

"This," he says, "This, this, I mean." He clucks and bunches his head into his shoulders. "It's just that, well, I know you can do this, and, I don't mean to say it's not what I asked for, it's just that, the way it settles, it just seems off. I'm not blaming you, I just should've, I mean, you're just one man, and this job, well, it's a lot for one man, and well ... you could have used some help." He glances at Paul and

then looks at the deck where Paul now glares. Aaron Skeens is thirty-six, a good fifteen years younger than Paul, some hotshot in computers, and apparently, an expert in construction.

This is the problem with contract work. Everybody is an expert. These people Paul works for, they watch one episode of *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*—a thousand people gather and build a house in an hour, free, from the goodness of their hearts—and suddenly they're Bob Vila. Plumbing, electrical, drywall, they could do it themselves if only they had the time. And they never lose an opportunity to tell you what's wrong. They leave passive aggressive notes: *Screws 8 in. on drywall!!! Don't forget the weatherproof flashing. Did you mix in the grout sealant?* but hardly ever say it to your face. These people are always watching.

His eyes, Paul's, he doesn't blink, his eyes are vacant and dry. He doesn't respond. He thinks about his breathing. He thinks, serenity now.

Aaron busies himself, finding a place for his hands, crossing his arms, then at his pockets feeling for something, and then finally stops, his right hand holding his left elbow, and his left hand at his face, over his mouth.

"Look, look," Aaron says. His glance darts from the deck to Paul. He turns and looks at the fairway. "You do good work. I've seen the work you did for Tom, he recommended you. It was good work, beautiful. The marble countertops, the cabinets, what was that, oak?"

Paul turns and looks at Aaron Skeens. "Maple." He stares.

Aaron avoids Paul's glance. He stomps the ground and checks the underside of his shoe. "Yeah, yeah, right. It's just first rate." He holds his elbow and a hand rubs at his face, the kind of gesture a woman would make.

Below the deck, Paul notices Aaron's daughter at the window of the walkout basement. The sun going down sprays a glare on the window. From inside, he thinks, she can't see them. She wears only a bra and panties. She dances. Her body is thin and boyish. She is

only thirteen, maybe fourteen, maybe younger. She moves her body, snakes like she's trying to take off her clothes with no hands. She turns her back toward the window and slides her arm down her back, butt, down her thighs, and bends over. She's done this a few times before. Danced like a stripper, like she was enticing him, like she wanted Paul to enter and do something about it. Paul glances at Aaron, to see if Aaron sees what he sees.

**That's the problem with Aaron, the man's clueless; can't keep** track of his own daughter. Can't control his own household. When Aaron and his wife would leave for the day, the girl traipsed about the house in short shorts and tube tops, sometimes just a bikini. Paul would catch sight of her through the sliding glass kitchen door or in the basement—not that he made any effort—she was just there, wanting to be seen. She acted as if Paul didn't exist, that the sputter and roar of his power tools hardly whispered, that his lumbering presence made no shadow.

A few days into the project, while Paul kneeled, unscrewing the deck boards before the kitchen door, dismantling the small landing and staircase—a platform inadequate to Aaron's vision—he got a whiff of perfume and heard the chatter of voices inside. The sun smeared over the window, he could see nothing but the glare. The door opened. He expected to see the girl, scantily dressed, maybe naked, holding out a hand to invite him in, and this would be his trial, his temptation—he detested weak men, men who abused their power, and he refused to be such a man. But he looked up and saw a peeled tomato.

It was a boy, fifteen or sixteen. His face was patched bright red, nose swollen from so many zits. Zits rashed on his cheeks and forehead, on his chin. A knob, a piercing the size of a car lighter, mushroomed from his earlobe. Black hair gelled and spiked. Too much cologne, too much gel. You could smell him coming. He wore basketball shorts, flip flops, and a black T-shirt with an American flag, but the flag was black and white. The print ragged as if the flag

had been dragged fifty miles on a dirt road. The boy looked bored, put out like Paul had asked him for help.

“Whatcha doing?” the boy said. The girl sat at the kitchen table and giggled.

Paul knelt with an elbow on his knee and a hand above his eyes, shading the sun. The tone of the boy’s voice was like a child, a smart ass. Paul didn’t answer.

“What are those, screws?”

“That’s right.” It was an act. The boy acting a fool for the girl. He’d play along. “You ever work with your hands?”

The boy turned to the girl and snickered. “You like crack?”

“What?” He thought of his own son and all his failed appeals. Any interest shown was insincere, patronizing, almost mocking. Pat you on the head and say that’s nice, dad. Work with your hands as a hobby not a way of life. These days you didn’t need to know how things work. Someone else could do it. Maybe a thousand people would gather and do all the things you should have done yourself.

“Screws and crack, huh?” The boy turned to the girl, smiled and the girl laughed.

Paul ignored it. He was just a kid. “Why don’t you pick up a hammer and help out?”

“You like that, screws and crack?”

Just breathe. Paul had the urge to put the boy in a headlock and pinch his blistering whiteheads—tell him to shut up, not say a word, listen for Christ’s sake. Every word was bullshit. Trying to get a reaction, piss you off. The boy stood there smirking. Paul said, “What the hell you trying to say?”

The boy laughed silently, turned to the girl who laughed behind her hand.

Paul felt the sun on his lower back, his shirt worked up and pants slumping, his butt crack, no doubt, exposed. He pulled his shirt down, pants up. “Why don’t you ...” He stopped before he said, go fuck yourself. He took a deep breath, put his knee down, and sat back on his boots. He looked up at the boy and said, “Don’t you have

anything better to do?" He waited. "Like I said, I could use a hand."

"You probably could," the boy said, and added, "Pedophile."  
And then shut the door.

Paul sat back on his boots, suddenly nauseous as if he'd been found out for some terrible, secret crime. The pain grinded at his hip. What the hell was that supposed to mean? In his day, if he talked that way to anyone, his mother or a priest, they'd cuff him over the head, box his ears, and he'd have accepted it, invited it. A well deserved correction: that's what the boy needed. Paul stared for a second at the blinding wash of sun over the window and thought of them inside watching.

All he had done was see—he couldn't help but see. Anyone in his place... The girl didn't seem to notice. It wasn't anything he wanted. The girl danced and he wasn't supposed to see? He looked down at the drill gun, at the screws, the screw holes and their splintering rims.

Over the next few weeks when he looked to the house, he didn't see her dancing, but the boy's tomato face shining coarse and scoured, and the girl somewhere near. It wasn't Paul's place to say anything. If Aaron didn't care, if Aaron was a pushover who had no control over his own daughter, who was he to judge? She wasn't his daughter. But he knew there was something fundamentally wrong. He knew the danger of a girl and a boy. Alone, with the whole summer before them. They watched him from the windows like he was a thief, or worse. They talked, conspired. Paul was no one to be talked about. It angered him to think what they might be saying. That he couldn't say, couldn't control, could only guess what went on between them. And what went on? She wasn't his daughter—not that it made it any easier.

If it had only been that, Paul would have said nothing, but every step of the project, Aaron pried his way in. He insisted the concrete footers be dug an extra foot deep—48 inches, overkill, to Paul's thinking, but he didn't mind, it just pushed the timeline back a week. Later, Aaron decided he wanted a pergola, and again, Paul

had to adjust the design, postpone. It wasn't that he minded, he understood, Aaron expected perfection, and deserved it, but Aaron didn't know the difference between cement and concrete, and each day, as Paul listened to Aaron's misgivings, he thought about the tomato faced smart ass giving it to Aaron's daughter.

Paul tempered himself, let it let slide. They could watch him, criticize. Either way he got paid. He even laughed to himself when he thought about the poor kid and his inflamed acne. Scrawny, awkward, ridiculous. He was just a smart ass kid getting kicks, showing off. The boy was restless, obnoxious, that energy aimed at power, and as any boy knew, power came through humiliation.

One day, as Paul was fitting a joist into a hanger he realized he needed a lever to prop the joist level, and as he shouldered the joist, poised on a ladder, he smelled cotton candy and burnt tobacco. He looked down and there was the boy, his face oily, red and scarred. The boy said nothing. Paul could forgive, overlook, he was trying to impress the girl. "Alright, son, you want to help out?" Paul took the bait. "I could use a crowbar in the tool chest over there."

The boy blinked his eyes at him, and went to the chest. He picked up a crescent wrench.

"No," goddamn it, Paul thought, "that's a crescent wrench." This was why he preferred to work by himself, the aggravation, the stupidity of some people. "I didn't say in the bag."

When he got down from the ladder the boy held a nail gun. "What are you...?" Breathe, he thought, breathe. "You think you're cute?"

"You think I'm cute?" He leveled the nail gun at Paul's crotch.

The boy wore a tank top and there was no place to grab him. His throat was thin, scrawny; he grabbed him like a beer can.

The boy gargled and spat, choked and flailed his arms. Paul had hold of him for little more than a second before letting him fall. The boy cowered pathetically. Paul took the nail gun. "If you were smart enough, you could kill someone with this." The boy had a barcode

tattooed on his shoulder. “You’re lucky I don’t call the police.”

A couple days later, his Sawzall went missing.

The following Friday he stood with Aaron, their backs to the golf course, regarding the deck’s progress. Aaron had expected it’d be further along. Paul could never keep track of his demands, all the nitpicky bullshit added on last minute. When Aaron mentioned the possibility of screening off the porch, Paul blurted out, “I’ve had just about enough.” He thumbed his upper lip and breathed. “I didn’t say anything before—it wasn’t my place. A man oversees his own house. Every man’s got a right, but goddamn it, I can’t take. I don’t deserve this.”

“What are you talking about?”

“First it’s one thing then another. I just find out they stole my Sawzall.”

“What? Who?”

“That’s just it. I don’t tell another man his business, poke in where it’s not my concern. But this goddamn kid—this smart ass, thief. He stole, I know it.” Paul squeezed his hand in to a fist. “Pushes my buttons. Goddamn it.” Goddamn it, he thought again.

“Who? What?”

He jabbed a finger at Aaron. “I don’t deserve that.”

“I don’t understand.”

“This kid, when you’re not home. He’s in there with your daughter.” Paul slid his tongue over his teeth, made a sucking sound. “Don’t know what they’re doing, but I could guess.” Paul looked at the poor guy. Paul crimped his lips, thinking, your own daughter, taking it. Some little punk kid. It’s what these liberals do. Live and let live. “I suggest you pay a little more attention to your household. I see them in there. He’s got tattoos. An earring the size of a finger. It’s a distraction I can’t deal with.”

Aaron held his elbows, a hand rubbed. He looked off to the golf course and back to the house, squinted as if he saw in the windows something he didn’t want. “I’m sorry,” Aaron said.



**The crack of an iron echoes from the fairway and a ball hurtles** down and crashes in the bushes at their back. Paul looks sideways at Aaron who turns to the sound of the ball, and shakes his head, annoyed. “Like I said, just top notch ... I mean, real quality work.” He seems to lose his train of thought. He turns to the fairway. “I swear. I love it here, great location, but sometimes.... Two months ago I had to replace a window.”

Paul grunts, and glares at Aaron’s back, challenging him to turn and look him in the eyes, thinking, get to the point. It isn’t anything that can’t be fixed. He doesn’t get paid to listen to Aaron ramble on. Waste his time. He looks back to the girl and watches. She flips her blonde hair and tosses it and wriggles.

A golf cart hums and parks near the conifers at their back. “Sorry,” the golfer yells over the hedges. “I’m just looking for my ball. Did you see it?” Aaron waves to give permission. The golfer scrounges in the bushes behind them, swatting the branches with an iron, making his way nearer.

“Skinny?” the golfer says. “Skeens? I thought that was you.”

Aaron reaches out a hand to Paul. “You’ll have to excuse me a second.”

Paul watches the girl dance. She puts a thumb in the waistband of her panties, pulls it taut and then smacks her thighs and pumps her hips. She tosses her hair. He looks back to see if Aaron sees, and he feels something he knows he shouldn’t and has to clear his throat. He doesn’t want to watch anymore—but she dances. She won’t stop dancing.

Paul watches the girl and overhears Aaron and this golfer’s conversation. They talk about their family, their business, their slice—“You just have to roll your wrists. Like this.” The golfer comments on the deck. “That’s nice,” he says. “Beautiful view. Just beautiful.” He pauses. Paul turns to see the golfer tilting his head. “I’m no expert but, from this angle, it just seems to go,” he glides a hand down his chest, “you know, a little, off. The line. It doesn’t look right.” And Aaron says, “Well, yeah. I see it. It’s not a problem. We’re taking care

of it as we speak. I got to go. Got to go now.”

Everybody’s a critic.

Aaron Skeens sidles up to Paul. He jerks a thumb toward the fairway. “Sorry about that.”

Paul crosses his arms and sockets his hands in his armpits. He presses his lips together. The pain in his hip tingles and he can feel his leg going to sleep. He shifts his weight.

“Where was I?” Aaron says.

“I don’t know.”

At the window, the girl stops to look at the sunset, and notices the men outside. She yelps and covers her breasts then her panties. She takes off upstairs.

Aaron looks at Paul as if to see if Paul saw what he saw. He runs a hand through his hair and rubs the back of his head. He looks at his foot scratching the gravel. “Anyway, like I’d been saying. You do great work. It’s just, well, you know, we just feel it would be better if we went another way with it, for now at least.”

Paul thinks about the girl, how Aaron knows he’d seen her—lets him know with a look. A look of judgment. He didn’t quite catch what Aaron said. But as Aaron talks he catches on.

Aaron talks. He finally finds what he’d meant to say, and tries to find a way to unsay it. He talks, using his hands like he’s putting things on a shelf, in order, like somehow this explains the problem, like somehow his criticism had ever constructed anything. Now his hands, flat like they’re files, like bookends, bounce up and down across his chest. He brings them together.

Paul had heard, it would be better if I went another way, and now understands what Aaron meant. He glares outright now, watching Aaron’s fingers scrape like rake prongs, now circling, now digging, like somehow by riling the air he might imitate a tool, and convince Paul he’d ever done anything with his hands at all, other than masturbate. Aaron needs a pie chart, a computer screen, numbers with letters and symbols—moron, he needs to make Paul a moron, as an excuse, and his hands are nervous, trying to shut the case, try-

ing to compress everything, because Paul has no recourse to logic or reason. Asshole, Paul thinks. Aaron's hands hypnotize and his voice titters, because he's afraid. It isn't the sun blazing on Aaron's face. Aaron is afraid and Paul's not convinced. This guy built a clock in an eighth grade shop class so he can tell you how to do your job. You work with your hands and you're a moron. That's his point, the long and short of it.

Aaron makes himself small, so in your rage you don't feed him to death with his own body parts. You wouldn't hit a man with glasses? There are technical matters someone of your mental capacity just can't fathom, there are regulations, codes. Aaron talks using his hands so Paul won't hear what he's saying. "It's just, I mean, I'm going to have to hire some guys to get this fixed, and well you can come back when they got the foundation all set up."

Paul's lips crack. "The foundation is set," he says. "I don't know who..." he pauses, wants to say, who the fuck, but holds it in, "...who you think you're talking to." Paul's hands are hard set in his armpits. He shifts his weight to his good leg, and winces. "I've worked in the sciences. I have a degree in geology." Paul likes to point this out. It was a choice he made. He isn't just some construction worker. "And you think you know better than I do? You? Or is it one these piss ants you'll bring in here? Those guys aren't even certified. I've dealt with those people. They don't even speak English. You know they're illegal." The blood flushes on Paul's scalp and colors the salted, tight-cut, horseshoe of hair purple.

"Okay," Aaron says. "Let's calm down here. I mean, technically, you're not certified either ..." A shot cracks in the distance, and comes crashing down into the bushes.

They all try to pull this shit. Paul prices his jobs at cut rate because he's not certified, but his work meets code. His work is sound. He takes pride in his work. Place his work next to anyone, it stands up. They always like to throw it in your face, bust your balls, and drive down the price. He's always upfront, never skimps, never cuts corners. If something goes wrong, he fixes it. He takes a cut, but he

always finishes his jobs, always makes right.

"All I'm saying is," Aaron goes on, "that for this stage of the project, I mean, I'll have these guys come in and do the deck part, and then you can come back, and finish the door and the railings, you know, the cosmetic stuff." Aaron jerks around toward the bushes, says to the foraging golfer: "Did you get your ball?"

"Got it," the golfer says. "Thanks."

Cosmetic stuff, Paul thinks. "There's nothing wrong. I'll just put a few shims up, under that post, and it's fixed. Structurally it's sound, there's nothing wrong."

"But that's like four inches off."

"I'll just shim it up."

"No. I know you know what you're doing, I just don't feel comfortable with that, and considering the problems we had with the cement. I want everything to be up to code."

Paul twitches a shrug and jerks his head. "It's up to code. I had the inspectors in at every stage." He rubs a jabbing finger under his nose. "Ask them. They'll tell you."

"Well, I ... I did. I did some asking around, and they said, it's not, it shouldn't be like that. It's just that I would feel more comfortable ... with, with more workers. More hands on the job."

"Fine then. Fine. If that's what you want. Pay me for this week, and I'll come back and do the rest." He wants to say he washes his hands of this mess. The goddamned kid. The goddamned aggravation. Every goddamn time.

"That's the other thing," Aaron says. He holds his hand to his face as if to ward off blows. "It's not fair, I mean, I have to hire these guys to redo the work, so it's only fair, it's not like I'm trying to be unfair, but I figure, just for this week at least, I'm not going to pay. And the materials, they'll have to take it down, start over, you have to consider that cost."

"So you been planning this then? That's eight hundred dollars you owe me. Good. Great. See how this works out for you. When are they supposed to be done?"

“By the end of next week they said.”

“They already did the estimate?” He glares at Aaron who nods sheepishly, toeing the gravel. “Alright.”

“You can leave your tools here, they’ll be fine, you know, and come back next week and finish.”

“You know I can’t just lose a week’s pay. I have a family. I have bills to pay.” He shakes his head, thinking, he has to take this from him, from this man-boy, who raised a slut for a daughter.

Aaron escorts Paul out front to his cargo van. Paul stalks alongside, trying to maintain some decorum. Paul gets in the van and puts his hands on the steering wheel. Aaron stands at the window and rubs his hands as if to squelch the need to have them flitting about. “I’ll let you know when to come back,” he says, raising his voice to be heard through the van window. “It’ll work out.”

Paul doesn’t reply, doesn’t nod. He puts the van in reverse and notices the Obama sticker on the bumper of Aaron’s BMW. Change, it says. Obama, Paul thinks. “I’ll come back,” he says as he drives off, taking in the near mansion houses, the opulence. “I’ll come back. I’ll come back, you cocksucker.”

On his way home Paul stops off at the 7-11. He contemplates the 40’s: Colt 45, Miller High Life, but what’s the use? They’re 3.2 percent, all he’d get is diarrhea. The travel mug he had brought in is the size of a router. He fills it up with cappuccino from the machine, it barely fits under the spout. He microwaves two burritos. He eats in the van and works out the comeuppance, what he should have said, and grumbles, scraping out curses. He says fuck to God and damn, God fucking damn, fucking cocksucker, God damn, sipping cappuccino, and spitting up burrito in between. The illegals. Barack Obama. The girl and that punk ass kid. The moral fiber of this country. *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*.

He rarely thinks about why people get what they get. Why some get more than others. Why God would allow it. Why he couldn’t have more—at least what he’s owed. He thinks this as some kind of prayer, God listening, acknowledging. He even puts his hands

together for a second on the steering wheel, and closes his eyes.

At home, Paul parks his cargo van out front, and thinks about what he would tell his wife. There's the vacation they've planned and the garage door that needs fixing. The kids are still at home, a couple years out of high school. His daughter would be out with her friends, and his son holed up in his room, working over a video game controller or at something he'd have to hide if you'd knock. His wife would be thumbing through the community magazine, picking out course offerings. If he goes in, she'd say, wouldn't this be nice, a ceramics class? Yoga? Tai chi? A class on paper art greeting cards—think how much money we'd save. Look, ballroom dancing—you promised. Paul, you promised.

As it is, the jobs are sporadic, a bathroom for a week, a kitchen for two, a basement for a month. There's never an overlap, never a surplus of work, always a week, sometimes two or three between jobs. He watches the house and gnaws a scab on his knuckle. They make due because of his wife. She's a nurse. He decides against telling her. He never gets out of the car.

Rain begins to fall. Ten-foot rain at first, one drop here, another ten feet away. The sky purples, and then goes black. Hail falls, thunking off the roof of the van. He watches the house through the rain. Paint blisters at the corners of each window. He can't even keep his own house from going to shit. A marble sized ball of hail bounces off the windshield and cracks a splinter in the glass. "God-damn it," Paul says. He calls his wife and tells her he's gonna be late. Paul starts the car and heads out, feeling his way through the fog.

He calls the Skeens' house from the payphone at the Diamond Shamrock. The rain has weakened, dies down as sudden as it came. The daughter picks up. "Nick," she says. She breathes into the receiver, and Paul hears. She breathes: "Nick, is that you?"

Paul hangs up. He calls back and when the girl answers he says, "Sorry to bother this time of night, but I'm with Citi Bank. Are your parents home?" She says no, they're not. "Sorry to hear that," Paul says. "Sorry to bother. I'll call back another time."

When he gets to Aaron's no one seems to be home—the lights are off. The rain sprinkles down. He backs the van into the driveway, kissing the garage door with the bumper. He backs off enough so he can open the doors. A light comes on in the upstairs window of the house. What would they do about it?

He finds the gate locked and has to climb, wobbling over the fence. He goes down the hill toward the walkout basement. The backdoor won't give. It's a sliding glass door, the door where he saw the daughter in her panties. His newly bought Sawzall lies there on the floor. His circular saw and saw horses. He yanks at the handle. A light goes off in the house.

He turns away from the house and sees a golf ball lying in the yard. He squishes out in the grass, squinting at the rain, and picks it up. He turns to the house takes aim, heaves back and slings it at the window. It bounces and shoots back at him and scurries off into the darkness.

He sets about gathering his tools from the shed in back and stacking them up by the gate. The mushy grass and mud sucks at his boots, and flicks his pants knee-high with mud. The rain damps his clothes, and every now and then, he wipes the rain from his face and flings it. He looks up at the dark sky and says, "Son of a bitch." Each trip he wipes the mud from his boots with an anchor stake, on the slope down toward the basement, hardly able to keep his balance.

His phone rings and he lets it ring. It keeps ringing. It's Aaron. Finally he answers. "What do you want?"

"What are you doing at my house? I should call the police. My daughter's inside freaking out, thinking someone's trying to break in. She saw your van in the driveway. What are you doing? We have an alarm system."

"I'm just getting what's mine, what you owe me."

"I don't owe you anything. I did you a favor. If you don't leave my house right now, I'm going to call the police."

"Where are you?"

"What does that matter? I mean, you need to leave. Stay away

from my daughter.”

“Your daughter? I’ll leave when I’m good and ready. We done with this then?” Paul hangs up. “Asshole.”

At the gate, he rummages through his tool chest and pulls out his drill, and removes the hinges from the gate. He pushes it from the hinge side, and the gate angles over and hangs from the lock. He rolls out the tool chests and loads the van.

There’s one last load, a wheelbarrow filled with nails and bolts, a couple bags of cement wrapped in a tarp, and a few other things he plans to take as payment, though it’s well short of what he’s owed. He crosses below the deck skeleton, and climbs the slope to the wheelbarrow on the other side of the house. The load is heavy and veers as Paul tries to get it going, keeping it from swerving into the posts. The wheel barrow noses heavy into the wet grass, bears down and gets stuck every so often. When it stalls, he heaves forward, and the weight of the load carries it onward.

It hits him, the wafting scent of cologne, faint then overpowering. He hears the slosh and suck of feet in the mud. A blow thuds at his lower back. He staggers forward. The wheel barrow thrusts ahead out of control and the wheel sinks in a hollow and the load pitches forward. When it hits, the wheelbarrow cranks off to the right, and the load slides out, throwing the handles upright. Paul tries to control the crash, and hugs at the load as it falls. The butt-end of the wheelbarrow slings up and strikes him in the chest, and catapults him. He tumbles into the bushes beside the deck. He feels the suction and pop of his thigh bone come loose of the hip-joint. Sprawled on his back amongst the bushes, he swallows cries, and tries to move, but the pain is too much, so he just lies there, whimpering.

He lies there. His only view is the careening deck beam. His eyes search the shadows. Nothing. The patter of rain. All he sees is the corner of the deck angled off. It seems to fall at him.

The phone rings. It keeps ringing. As he is, Paul can’t angle himself to answer, and he would, he would answer. The rain picks



up again, and the sprinklers come on. Sometime later, he hears doors slam shut out front. There is a murmur of voices. He hears the static of walkie-talkies, and can just make out the heads of two police officers who peek around the corner, on the other side of the yard. They stand there with their hands on their hips, waiting for the sprinklers to stop.

“My leg,” Paul says, groaning, groping. His leg is bent and twisted. He can’t feel his foot. He paces his breathing to keep the pain from shooting, but it shoots, up and down his spine, and even whispering, “My leg,” again makes the pain pulse and torque, in his ribs, down his spine, grinding at his hip.

And then they’re standing over him, two policemen looking stern. Aaron stands behind them with what looks to Paul to be a smile, holding his fist to his chest, rubbing it with the other hand. The policemen appraise him but say nothing. Aaron steps forward, edges past the policeman. “Oh, God, Paul,” he says. “What happened? Are you all right?” He kneels down.

“Don’t touch me.” Paul breathes slowly. “It was that goddamn kid.”

“The kid?”

If he could move, if he could roll over, he’d pull Aaron down into the mud. He’d ask him, The cosmetic stuff? You know? The kid that’s fucking your daughter, you know about that, you cocksucker? But he can’t. He just lies there with his hand on his hip, gritting his teeth.

“Paul?” Aaron rubs his leg as if he can feel the pain. “Paul? I’m sorry. This isn’t...”

“My leg,” he says. He leans forward slightly and runs both hands down his thigh, making a show of his pain. He says, “It’s my leg. The hip, my leg,” as if to explain, as if to say sorry. “My leg,” he says. “My leg,” and he means it now as a threat, an accusation. These people, he thinks, these goddamn people.

“Paul, this can be fixed.” Aaron winces and his tongue sizzles between his teeth. He turns to the policemen and sort of sniffs, dismissing them. “There’s an ambulance.” He nods to the policemen.

“It’s on its way.”

Paul notices a light inside the house, deep in the basement near the stairs. Through the dark windows and the night’s hollow reflection, he can just make out a figure. It’s the girl. She stands at the window wearing a sheer nighty that hardly touches her hips, standing over his Sawzall. She poses, it seems, as a woman in a lingerie ad. Paul inhales deeply, and takes a series of shallow, wheezing breaths. He looks at the girl, shoots a glance at Aaron, and returns his gaze to the girl. She isn’t dancing. She won’t dance. Dance, dance for Christ’s sake, he thinks. She stands lifeless as a mannequin, as dull, as cunning, and watches. She stands and watches him and there’s nothing he can do.