It was getting close to dark when Don dropped me off at the zoo parking lot, where Vera was parked. He seemed calm and cleansed after his eruption. He had turned solicitous about my stomach, urging me to let him run me to a doctor. I thanked him but said I had one or two things to do.

I had planned to pay Brook a visit, to update her on all I’d learned. But my stomach was starting to give me serious trouble. Before, there had always been more commotion than pain, and the pain was general and bearable. Today the commotion was a good deal worse and the pains were fairly awful. Every couple of minutes it felt like somebody was jabbing a hot icepick through one of the walls.

I decided to lie down a while, to see if things would settle. But as soon as I got situated in Vera’s back seat, head propped on my rolled jacket, legs out straight and hands folded over belly, I began to be visited by thoughts of the previous night. Brook in her trashy dress, pitching the woo with Kyle. Sadie with me on the dance floor, going through the motions, still steamed at me for avoiding Jean. June and I at moonset talking about Edward, standing on common ground at last—until I pulled the rug out from under us. The disappointments and failures, as I counted them up, seemed really to be part of one larger thing, facets of a great flawed stone I’d been carving all my life, a ghastly and worthless ornament that would fit aptly on the lid of my tomb. Ah, my tomb, suddenly it seemed very close, its lid yawning, that dark mouth beckoning as I lay there corpse-like in the chill.

Maybe I was improving as a payer of attention. How else make sense of the terror that overtook me now, the same terror I had
tasted the last time I visited Val? That day I couldn’t place this
familiar feeling, but this evening it was different, the terror swept
through me and took me back to a specific night, one much colder
than this, so cold in fact that my grandpa insisted I leave the barn
and sleep in the house. I must have been seven or eight. There I lay
in Daddy’s old bedroom, pants buttoned, coat on, shoes tied in case
I needed to flee. I dared not close my eyes. My body lay curled like a
giant ear, sorting through the sounds of that windy winter’s night,
sifting for anything, the rattling window, the creaking stair that
would be my signal to run. Uncle Norman had warned me he’d be
coming, hot to catch me squatting in his room. But Norman only
reminded me of what I knew already. Daddy was dangerous. He’d
knocked me around plenty of times before, I’d seen him knock
Mama, and I knew he had a history of killing little boys. Mama
said so when my baby brother came out dead. Not right when it
happened, not even at the funeral where we buried the little box.
But later, one time when she was yelling at Daddy, saying he had
killed my brother by beating on her.

So he got my brother and now he was after me, lurking out
there, so patient, waiting for the fear to freeze me good. He had
always been after me. Always. Even when I was too big to fear
him physically, too rational to believe he was alive. Even when
I had escaped his domain, when I had put three major mountain
ranges between me and his old stomping grounds. Even when he
vanished from my thoughts he figured in all I did, that fear stay-
ing with me like the ghost of an amputated limb. Even now, inside
the car, inside my belly, and everywhere outside—I was steeped in
fear, poached and pickled in it. No wonder I was falling apart. No
wonder I had failed with everyone who mattered to me. The only
surprise, really, was that I was still here, still able to see this and
try to do something about it.

It was urgent that I act. Not someday. Not tomorrow. Now.
It was probably better if I didn’t go see Brook. What I aimed to
do involved breaking a couple of laws. Probably little ones, but
there was still no sense tangling her up in that. She didn’t need
complications. My main reason for going down there would be to get a pat on the back. Under the circumstances that seemed silly. Brook had her deal with the mountain lions, Don had his deal, Cliff Carter had his, and so did Dick Beech, and Cory, and Chet Burns. This particular piece of it was all mine.

I thought I’d drive over and disable the trap Don and I had set first. Its location was fresh in my mind, I wouldn’t even need the map. It was a short trip from the zoo parking lot across Old Olives and down to the river access road that led back to the trap site. But when I got to the access road I found the gate shut and locked. Hadn’t figured on that. I left Vera and slipped through the gate’s two big bars, setting off on foot.

What an evening. Chilly, clear, with the half-moon above my left shoulder and throwing down light enough to make the gravel road glow dimly ahead of me. My body was innocent of all food and my senses wonderfully keen. I smelled the dusty gravel underfoot, the anise growing nearby, even the river flowing swiftly beyond the mounds of dredged rocks. I heard the hiss of traffic on a downstream bridge. My stomach flipped like a fish.

The trap was a mile-and-a-half in. Thankfully, the last fifty yards the pains that stabbed my gut were sharp enough to eclipse any fear I had of nearing the baited trap. When I got there I worked swiftly. I used a branch to activate the trigger, dropping the metal door with a loud and satisfying clank. I allowed myself a moment to stand there smelling the deer we’d used for bait. Heart, liver, loins, hooves, hide. It made me hungry, sent a little wave of lust down along my thighs. I checked the map for the nearest trap, which was two miles farther down the road I had come in on.

And so off I went to tamper with another piece of government property. I kept my mind off my stomach by projecting myself into the next morning, when I would wander into the Department of Wildlife compound, worn out, dirty, and triumphant. I would go straight to Cliff Carter’s office and defiantly confess my crimes. Or, better, I would call one of the TV stations and make my confession on the air. I would have to wait awhile for the TV crew to show,
which would give me time to drop by the Hooked on Fishing office and shoot the breeze with Emilio, who had replaced me behind the big desk. But pretty soon Shirley from Public Safety would come in and say she was ready for me. Didn’t I know she was on the news now, working for channel thirteen? I didn’t, but I congratulated her and said it came as no surprise to me, I always knew she’d get a break. She took my arm and led me out to where they had set up the lights and camera.

Ladies and gentlemen, I would say, squinting into the lights, I have a confession to make. First of all, pardon my appearance, but I’ve been running around all night through the countryside along the river. Why was I out there? Because I happened to know that as many as ten traps had been set to catch a mountain lion, any mountain lion. Now I know most of you are convinced a mountain lion killed that boy who disappeared, and possibly one did. The fact is there’s not enough evidence right now to say one way or the other. And yet your Department of Wildlife is going right ahead, knowing they’ve got public opinion on their side, knowing that most people want to see a lion strung up for what happened to that boy.

Shirley said, Mr. Sayers, you mentioned something about confessing?

That’s right. I want to confess to tampering with government property, and whatever other crimes they decide to charge me with. I went out last night and sprung all their traps before they could string up an innocent lion.

Wasn’t that risky?

I guess I thought the alternative was riskier.

What alternative?

Before I could answer, a scream sucked me right out of my reverie. Not a person’s but a mountain lion’s, that fierce, chilling sound that I had heard Laurel and Joshua make several times during my days at the zoo. It brought the hair up all across my shoulders. I stood still a moment, getting my bearings, realizing I’d covered quite a bit of ground. I turned to my right and left the road, walking in the direction of the scream.
The moon gave me all the light I needed to read the uneven terrain. I tried to walk quietly, avoiding brushpatches and the high piles of loose rock when I could. When I had to cross one of the piles I would crouch down and let my hands help with the walking. There was no real pain in my stomach now, just pressure, a lot of it, and a kind of angry heat. I didn’t even try to resist it. It had me, just as the lion had me, drawing me to it with a second appalling scream.

This one was louder, closer, out ahead of me and to the left. I set my course by it and tried to follow as straight a line as I could. I walked under a stand of oaks where it was very dark, then crossed a shallow dip. The next scream came from so close I almost thought it was behind me. I was making my way through another stand of oaks and I barely paused, pulled forward as if by fate’s fingers.

The trees stopped at the edge of a small clearing where the trap had been set. I paused a moment and tried to put a lid over the building pressure in my stomach. Also I studied the cage, looking for the caught mountain lion, seeing for the first time that I had come here to free it, that if ever I were going to release this pressure inside me this was what I must do. To spring the traps, to prevent the crime was not enough. The deed was done and I must undo it. I was grateful for the chance.

The cat was full-grown, crouched so low it appeared to be a feature of the land, a long low rock curving up from the earth. I had taken several steps forward before I saw that it was not in the trap, but beside it. The ears were pinned back and it was looking right at me, about to spring. I stopped. My bowels loosened, my shoulders rose up toward my ears. I swallowed hard, pushing the heat and pressure back down to my stomach, glimpsing the cruelty of the joke I’d played on myself, and tasting the dark justice of it. As if I deserved a chance at redemption. As if I deserved anything but this. I pivoted on one foot, turning back toward the trees.

Number one, I heard Shirley say, do not run away. Running may stimulate a mountain lion’s instinct to chase. Number two, don’t crouch or bend over. A person squatting or bending over
looks like a four-legged prey animal. Three, do everything you can to appear larger. Raise your arms. Open your jacket if you’re wearing one. Wave your arms and speak firmly in a loud voice.

I felt the cat behind me, locked into the pursuit now, creeping along with small steps. I felt myself shrinking, melting like wax in a fire, not heeding Shirley’s words but obeying the law of an ancient dance, dropping to one knee, hunching my back over, raising my arms in some futile attempt to protect my head. All resistance was draining away. I was not really fleeing the cat, but inviting it. There was something delicious in this succumbing, like letting a wave pick up your body and carry it away, like finally getting what you deserve.

I turned back just as the cat sprang toward me, coming for the kill, and I stood up tall to embrace my fate, flinging my arms wide, standing on my toes as whatever had been building inside my stomach erupted. A dark, violent concoction, a witch’s brew of terror and rage rose from some secret cauldron, surging up out of me and storming the clear cold air, forming the most fearsome sound I ever hope to hear.