Indentations and Other Stories

Schall, Joe

Published by NYU Press

Schall, Joe.
Indentations and Other Stories.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/15790.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/15790

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=499587
MRS. BILL'S SON, JERRY, USUALLY WATCHED HER TEND HER GARDEN FOR HOURS FROM HIS INVENTION ROOM WINDOW JUST TO BE CERTAIN THAT SHE WAS INDEED INSANE. ALTHOUGH MRS. BILL BOASTED AN ENTIRE HARDWARE STORY OF NON-MECHANICAL GARDENING TOOLS IN HER GARAGE, JERRY NOTED THAT SHE HAD A FETISH FOR A PARTICULAR SHOVEL. SOMETIMES SHE EVEN STOOD JUST BELOW HIS WINDOW, EMBRACING THE SHOVEL IN HER CALLoused HANDS AND, JERRY WAS SURE, WHISPERED INTIMACIES TO IT. THEN JERRY OPENED HIS WINDOW AND GLIDED HIS TORSO OUT OVER HIS MOTHER'S HEAD, WITH HIS ABDOMEN AND PALMS ON THE WINDOWSILL, HIS KNEES LOCKED, HIS SHOES HOOKED INTO HOLES HE HAD BEAT INTO THE DUSTY, HARDWOOD FLOOR WITH A CROQUET MALLET, A PUTTYKNIFE, AND AN AWL. THEN HE COULD SEE THAT HER FACE WAS RAISED TO THE GREAT SHOVEL GOD, HER LIPS TREMBLING IN MANIACAL ADORATION. AT JUST THE RIGHT MOMENT, WHEN MRS. BILL WAS ENTIRELY ENTRANCED, JERRY IMAGINED HIMSELF CLUBBING HER WITH A ZUCCHINI, WRESTLING THE SHOVEL FROM HER, AND SMASHING HER AGAIN AND AGAIN OVER THE
head until she drifted off into apoplexy and couldn’t tend her
garden anymore. Jerry was twenty-four years old.

Mrs. Bill’s full name was Eddiah Joan Bill, but all her
friends, and Jerry, called her Edda. She embodied a special
kinship with the vegetable kingdom. She resented all
machines because, as she said, “machines are an insult to the
bounty of the earth.” She flatly refused to buy a power lawn
mower. “Nothing powered by gasoline,” she insisted, “can
outdo the heart of a weed.” Then she chuckled.

But Mrs. Bill was a practical woman. She realized that
machines, like people, had their roles to fulfill, and sometimes
you had to hire someone to drag them through your soil. “All I
ask,” she would say to the tillerman, “is that you till my garden
with love.” When plowing, the tillerman kept his balance by
turning his green baseball cap to the left side and his pink
tongue to the right.

For months Jerry, the inventor, had been plotting to trick
his mother into buying a riding lawn mower. “To make it
easier on yourself,” he told her with a secret smile. Actually he
liked to imagine her shrieking figure reeling along
uncontrollably on the machine with the throttle stuck,
churning up all her vegetables, or randomly slamming her
into a tree. Maybe a nice hole in the earth would open up and
suck her away, Jerry hoped. At breakfast one morning, he
thought she was about primed to purchase the mower.

“But the blades on that handmower are so old,” Jerry said.

Mrs. Bill noisily chomped on a carrot with her false teeth.

“For your health, Edda,” he said, gently flicking his
fingers over her wrist. “So you don’t have to push around that
old manual mowing machine anymore.”

“It is not,” she said, squeezing an acorn squash in her fist,
“a machine.”

68
And that had been that. That had always been that. Mrs. Bill shook a clenched iron fist against all machines. When Jerry had bought a TV, Mrs. Bill smashed an eggplant all over the screen. Then she wrote up some guidelines and posted them in the parlor room.

THESE RULES SHALL GOVERN THIS HOUSE, JERRY
1.) You may invent anything you wish, but none of your inventions may be machines.
2.) A machine is any mechanical or senselessly noisy item used to annoy another person, such as a radio, jackhammer, or can opener.
3.) Although your red wagon is in some ways a machine, it is allowed so you can haul parts for your inventions.
4.) Two wrong machines don't make a right machine.

This, she knew, would offer the boy direction and incentive to keep making inventions which were not machines.

"Ever since he was a child," Edda was fond of saying, "I knew Gerald would be an inventor. He was always having bright ideas. Just like a light bulb. And dreams. Dreams you couldn't imagine."

Actually Jerry had never invented anything, but he had written to the government several times requesting patents. Since he got no replies, Edda assured everyone that the government was keeping its eye on Jerry, just waiting for the perfect moment to issue the winning patent. Actually Mrs. Bill didn't think Jerry would ever really win a patent, but she had to keep up appearances for his sake. Actually Jerry never sent any of the letters he showed to his mother. He kept them locked away in a folder in his invention room marked "Letters Not Sent." It was all part of a psychological game he was playing.
with Mrs. Bill without her knowing it. He even told her about his inventions in severe detail, but never let her see them because they were in the “nominal stage.” She didn’t know what that meant, but it sounded like something an inventor would say. Jerry recorded each instance of her repeating “nominal stage” on a bar graph in a brown folder. One day she said it fourteen times.

Mrs. Bill was especially proud that none of Jerry’s inventions would be machines. She told everyone who listened that Jerry’s inventions didn’t depend on electricity or gasoline or extension cords or tubes or disgusting buttons or pumps or sharp gray metal or any other contraptions: they were completely independent, just like him. Of course she couldn’t tell people too much about the inventions, or they might steal Jerry’s ideas. She told them that someone’s ideas might be stolen if they were not yet patented.

Although Mrs. Bill was talkative and charitable with her friends in this manner, she did not really like any of them. She reasoned logically that her disposition was more suited to gardening than to liking people. So she worked on both at once. Each new year she counted all those who claimed to be her enemies, and some she considered her enemies instinctively, and planted that same number of cabbage seeds. She planted an extra dozen just in case. Whenever she felt particularly hateful, she gazed over her cabbage plants like a great vegetable goddess, holding aloft her shovel, and visualized the heads of her enemies poking up out of the leaves. When she could imagine all of their faces clearly, gazing upward in neat, submissive rows with their mouths open, she prayed for them. Each one individually. All of her enemies’ faces were green.

She prayed things like “help so-and-so in the ways listed in my head,” or “help so-and-so to be a better so-and-so,” or even
“help this cabbage head to grow.” Of course, she was really praying for her enemies and her cabbages at the same time. She was killing two birds with one stone.

When she ran out of enemies and cabbages to pray for, she stood under Jerry’s window and prayed for his inventions.

“Dear Jesus,” she prayed, “help Gerald’s latest invention to be a smashing success for us, and help him to know You as a real, talkable, everyday person like me—”

She was in just such a state of prayer one Saturday morning, and Jerry was watching over her from his invention room window. Her lips nearly kissed the shovel this time, and Jerry was sure he could make out either the word “Jesus” or “Jerry” or “Jingle.” He pictured her then with a cucumber in each ear. A tomato in her mouth. Cauliflower sprang up between her absurd toes. A parsley sprig was lodged under a dirty, cracked fingernail. She had stopped wearing fingernail polish years ago. She certainly looked like a damned idiot, Jerry thought. Then he ran to get the front door before she heard the unexpected knock.

Gulliver Pulver stood before Jerry in the parlor room doorway holding a free newspaper. He had been nurtured on Gerber strained apricot baby food until he was four. Then his mother, on an obstetrician’s advice, had switched him to Quaker oatmeal. His chest fell in one smooth, pink roll down to his thighs, and the fat around his knees commingled when he managed to stand still. He had a tiny saliva bubble on his lips from breathing so heavily, because he had just ridden his banana bike all the way up the hill. The bubble fell from his lips and splattered on the linoleum of the parlor room floor. Gulliver was eleven years old.

“And what’s your name?” Jerry said, quick as a cat.

“Gull . . . Gulliver. Gulliver Pulver,” Gulliver stuttered,
confused. The newspaper office had said that a Mrs. Bill lived at this address. This was not a Mrs. Bill. The man had traces of whisker on his oval, concave face. From the neck up he looked like a cake of Camay with a rash.

“So little Gully,” Jerry said, “what do you want?”

“Are you Mr. Bill?”

“No,” Jerry said, annoyed. “He’s dead. Mrs. Bill killed him. Call me Jerry.”

“Yes . . . um . . . is Mrs. Bill here?”

“Oh,” Jerry said, “she’s off foddering around in the garden.”

The screen door to the kitchen opened, and Jerry hushed Gulliver. Behind the wall, they could hear Mrs. Bill’s body rumbling towards the parlor room, floor boards groaning under her weight. Gulliver’s eyes popped wide when she entered the parlor room. He dropped the newspaper.

“Try not to laugh at her,” Jerry whispered quickly.

“Gerald,” she accused him, “is this another one of your little friends?”

“Why no, Edda,” Jerry said sweetly. “This is Gulliver Pulver, and he’s here to see you.”

“And what can I do for you, Mr. Pulver?” she demanded, getting right to the point. She always called small boys Miss-ter to let them know she was in charge. She stood before Gulliver like a huge, red tractor, sputtering wisps of steam, clay on her boots, shorts tight around her knees, stomach bulging and hard, her shovel poised on her shoulder like a club, dripping mud. Her square nose was flanked by two pierogie-shaped cheeks—rolling mountains she managed to crest only by forcing her eyeballs to the tops of their sockets as she stared down at Gulliver, getting to the point.
"I'm sellin' special 'scription rates, ma'am. I represent The Daily Chronicle, a local newspaper with current 'formation." Like any good businessman, he had memorized a speech, Mrs. Bill noted with approval.

Edda was satisfied that she had sufficiently intimidated the boy and decided to be friendly.

She slapped her meaty hand down on his shoulder. "Well then Mr. Pulver, let's talk business. Gerald, fetch Mr. Pulver a nice little sugar cookie and half a glass of milk."

By the time Jerry had returned from the kitchen with Gully's snack, Mrs. Bill had locked up the whole deal. Gulliver would deliver The Daily Chronicle promptly without fail Monday through Saturday by 6:00 p.m. sharp until Mrs. Bill otherwise terminated their agreement, and he would collect his set fee each Saturday morning, notifying her one month in advance if set fee was scheduled to increase. Gulliver gave Mrs. Bill an official white and black Chronicle card from which he would punch holes weekly as a receipt with Mrs. Bill witnessing, and Jerry hung the card on a bare nail in the paneling by the parlor room door.

After closing the deal, Mrs. Bill told Jerry to show Gulliver to the parlor room door and rumbled back to her garden.

"Mrs. Bill said that you're an inventor, Mr. Bill," the boy said.

"Call me Jerry. I'm really a magician, Gully," Jerry whispered confidentially.

"But she said you're an inventor," Gully said.

"That's part of my magic, Gully," Jerry winked. "She thinks I'm an inventor because I tricked her into it, but I'm really a magician." Jerry had already instinctively decided to take the boy into his confidence.
“Will you show me a magic trick?” Gully asked.

“Yes Gully, next week, my little Gully,” Jerry promised smoothly.

Gully wiggled happily. This had certainly been an exciting day for him. First a new customer and now a magician. “See you next week, Mr. Bill!” he said, struggling onto his banana bike.

“Call me Jerry,” Jerry said.

Jerry spent all week in his invention room inventing a magic trick to play on Gully. He had never worked on any of his other inventions quite so zealously. It took him four nails and thirteen needles to get it just right. He had to walk into town to find masonry nails strong enough for the vital incision. Pounding the nails masterfully with an ordinary hammer, he formed a tiny but perfectly round incision halfway into the top edge of a 1930 peace dollar coin, then cleaned out the incision scrupulously with a sliver of 120-grit sandpaper wrapped around a toothpick. Then he lodged the end of a needle into a small vice secured to an orange crate, and chopped off the top and eye of the needle with a small hammer and intentional suddenness. Twelve of the needles he broke were too long or too short, but the last one was just right. He dipped the newly flattened end of the needle carefully into a bowl of Elmer’s glue, then forced the glued end of the needle into the incision in the coin with his water-pump pliers, careful not to impair the natural point of the needle by squeezing too indiscriminately. It took him five attempts to get the needle to stay in place, and after each try he had to sandpaper the incision out again and redip the needle. He finally got it secured by holding it perfectly still in place for five minutes while the glue dried. A
vein in his left wrist turned purple from the pressure. On the first try, he burnt the end of the needle with the blue tip of a match flame so it blended in better with the color of the coin. Mrs. Bill could hear him whooping away with joy in his invention room all week, and she spent an extra five minutes a day under his window, praying that his new invention would be something useful and completely unlike a machine. Jerry was so involved in his current project that he hardly had time to observe her.

He waited for Gully on the front porch on Saturday morning so he would get to him before Mrs. Bill. It excited him that he could employ something as small and innocent-looking as a trick coin, hidden in an ordinary shirt pocket, in the general scheme against his mother.

As he rode up in front of the house, Gulliver waved to Jerry with one arm and ran his banana bike into a juniper bush on the front lawn. He wrestled the bike out of the bush, then puffed his way up to the porch.

“Will you show me the trick now, Jerry?” he piped.

It was just as he had guessed. Gully’s little mind had been absorbed by the trick all week too. He noted also that Gully had called him Jerry. They understood each other now. They were brothers now. They were co-conspirators. They were friends.

“I’ll show you,” he said, “but only if you promise to do something for me.”

Gully gulped.

“After you finish your collecting today, come back here and take a ride into town with me to a curio shop.”

He knew that Mrs. Bill took a walking tour every Saturday afternoon and it would be a safe time to plot alone with Gully. Mrs. Bill would never expect anything underhanded could happen during her walking tour.
"What's a curio shop?" Gully asked, a bead of perspiration shooting down his nose, off his chin, under his collar, and into his navel, where it was absorbed by a fuzzball.

"Oh, they have trick chairs and explosives, red snake skins and green popcorn, giant blue marbles, and lots of other items useful for magic tricks," Jerry said with pretended nonchalance.

"You mean a junk shop?"

"No Gully, I mean Coco Bunner's Curio Shop!"

"Yeah!" said Gully, his stomach quivering with delight.

So it was all set up. Jerry asked him if his parents would miss him, and Gully assured him that they would not, as long as he was home before dinner. The perfect situation. Jerry warned him not to tell his parents or Mrs. Bill or any other adult, because they certainly wouldn’t approve of a boy his age dabbling in magic.

"But what about the trick!" Gully remembered in all the excitement.

"Ah yes Gully, the trick," said Jerry dramatically. "Here we have an ordinary trick coin." He instantly produced the peace dollar coin with the burnt needle hook from his shirt pocket, and held it at a safe distance from Gully at eye level between the index and little fingers of his right hand, just as he had practiced.

"Watch this coin carefully, Gully, very carefully, carefully," he said in a mesmerizing voice. He turned his left side to Gully and made several arc-like passes with the coin from his right hip to the level of his right shoulder, extending his arm fully and holding the coin just at the tips of his fingers. He repeated "carefully, carefully," with each pass. Then when Gully's attention lingered away from Jerry's hip for a moment, Jerry neatly hooked the coin on his pants and pulled his empty hand away. He wore his black corduroys just for the occasion.
Gully was agog. His little mouth was frozen in an O just large enough to stuff a tangerine into, Jerry thought. Or a kiwi. Or a small Macintosh apple. Jerry had him in his grip now, he was sure. He shook his right hand in the air hypnotically and wiggled every finger to prove that the coin was no longer there. He opened and closed his empty fist at varying speeds, while Gully stared on, awestruck. Then he began his methodic handpasses again, repeating “watch carefully, carefully—” At just the right instant he snatched the coin into his hand again, and Gully closed his little mouth and fluttered his hands in front of it in unspeakable admiration. Gully pleaded with him to do it again, but Jerry remarked that a good magician never repeated his tricks, and sent him out to the garden to collect his money from Mrs. Bill.

“I'll be back in a few hours to go to the curio shop!” Gully yelled as he rounded the house.

“It's a date, Gully,” Jerry said.

From his invention room window, he watched his mother counting out the coins for Gully while standing among the future turnips. He covered his mouth and chuckled through his nose, thinking how Gully would try to mimic his trick while riding his banana bike home and would make some of the coins disappear, thereby coming up short when he counted his collection money. But he liked Gully. Gully was his little sibling. His thoughts returned darkly to his mother. She was not worthy of tying Gully’s sneakers. He called her a muskmelon. A rotted yellow pepper. An onion. He imagined himself breaking her shovel viciously over his knee, while Mrs. Bill was tied to a nearby tree by his little, whooping, painted helper Gully.

Coco Bunner’s Curio Shop was the best junkshop in the county. “A shop,” Coco told his customers, “where dreams can
be bought and sold.” He did so much business that he had won a petition for a traffic light at the intersection in front of his shop. Coco didn’t just take any junk, he selected what to buy or trade depending on the type of junk in greatest demand on the market. He had sixteen years experience and toured junkshops all over the state once a month, bartering with other junkmen like a prosecuting attorney. On sight he tagged any piece of junk in his mind with an appropriate label: Celebrity Junk, Eccentric Junk, Closet Junk, Attic Junk, Living Room Junk, Mechanical Junk, or Junkity Junk. He also tagged each of his customers by the looks on their faces when they came in the front door: Trendy, Glitsy, Browsy, Ritz, and Patsy. He had an overabundance of Celebrity Junk this month, and was right in the middle of a special prayer for a Patsy, when Jerry and Gully came bursting through the door. He rang the cowbell next to his cash register merrily.

“Hi, Ho!” yelled Coco. This was his traditional greeting reserved for a Patsy.

“Whaddaya know!” yelled Jerry. This was his traditional greeting reserved for someone he thought knew nothing.

While Coco and Jerry exchanged a slick patter of talk like two expert chess players, Coco took down a blunderbuss from the wall behind him and polished the walnut stock suggestively with Lemon Pledge and a diaper. The doughboy, Coco noted, was sufficiently impressed. Gully rolled his eyes up and down the cluttered shop walls, then began scouring the ceiling, expecting to see more curio hanging there.

“And what does this little marshmallow want?” Coco said suddenly, rumpling Gully’s hair. “A glass rose for his mama maybe?” Coco pulled a plastic-stemmed rose with glass petals from a bowling alley display case and rotated it in front of Gully’s face. When you shook the rose it snowed inside the 78
petals. A very popular item at Christmas.

"Whoa now, Coco, this boy here is a caution," Jerry said. "I warn you he’s one smooth peach. He’s liable to just take over your business someday." Jerry patted Gully between the shoulderblades and told him to look around the shop while he talked business.

Jerry had already planned what he would need for his next trick: a strong rope and a heavy object between fifty and seventy-five pounds. But he understood the mechanics of barter. To get a decent price he had to let Coco make his pitch. Coco tried to sell him a box of original Campbell’s ketchup bottles and a huge stack of National Enquirer magazines; but Jerry already had several stacks of Star magazines and he was an inventor, not a collector. He toyed with Coco for a few minutes, then casually let his eye drift to a thick rope stretching from the ceiling to the floor.

"This," Coco said, catching Jerry’s eye, "is one reliable rope. It was used on the last man to be hanged in this state by the three Ks." This was the story that another dealer had given to Coco, and although Coco didn’t believe it, it instantly turned the rope into Celebrity Junk. The rope was loosening in a few places, so Coco had tied it around a hoof-shaped hook in the ceiling, then stretched it taut and tied the other end of the rope around an old radiator lying on the floor. This stretched the rope sufficiently so that the strands looked a bit tighter.

"Hmmmmmn," said Jerry tentatively. "Well now. Hmmmmmn. What’s this musty old thing?” he said, pushing at the radiator lying at his foot.

"Ahhhhhhhh," said Coco suavely. "Now this radiator was handled by Mr. James Cash Penney himself! Back before he changed his name to J. C. and opened all those stores."

Jerry placed his chin between the thumb and index finger of his right hand, rested his right elbow in the palm of his left
hand, and assumed a skeptical look. He bent down and ran his fingers over the radiator. It was smooth, metallic, and cold, like the edge of a blunt sword. On the bottom the words GOLDEN RULE bumped out harsh and green from the surface. Jerry noted the name on it, stood up, and rubbed the dust from his hands with a disgusted finality, informing Coco that he was no fool, and this was certainly no James Cash Penney radiator.

Coco was ready for him. He plucked the book, *Fifty Years with the Golden Rule*, by James Cash Penney, from the shelf behind him, ceremoniously blew the dust off the cover, and handed it to Jerry. Jerry paged through the book for a moment and the words GOLDEN RULE leapt out magically from almost every page. Impressed, he handed it back and admitted that he might be interested in both the rope and the radiator, for the right price. Coco, who knew a Patsy when he found one, then tried to interest Jerry in a wooden helicopter blade. It was the same blade, said Coco, that the photographer bought in the movie *Blow-Up*, but Jerry wasn't buying it. He also flatly refused the dented trash can that Coco promised had been inhabited by Cookie for the first nine episodes of *Sesame Street*, before Oscar the Grouch moved in on his territory. Finally, they dragged the GOLDEN RULE radiator over to a penny-for-your-weight-and-fortune scale, and it weighed sixty pounds. Perfect. In the end Jerry traded a three-headed brass lamp and seventy-five dollars for the rope and the radiator, and both men shook hands satisfied they had made a shrewd deal.

“Come on, Gully,” Jerry said, “before they arrest us for stealing.” Gully had been in a corner looking through a magnifying glass larger than his head. Taped on the rim of the glass was a note: “Used by Sherlock Holmes HISSELF!! (-Coco).”

80
As they pulled the radiator and rope home in the red wagon, Gully pestered Jerry to show him a new trick.

"Patience, Gully," he said. "The first thing a magician learns is patience."

Gully squirmed around on the sidewalk practicing patience. He was beginning to be demanding, Jerry could see that, and coin tricks would not continue to satisfy the boy's curiosity. Eventually Gully would get older. Or worse yet, he would figure out the trick for himself. But Jerry was ready. He had already searched the dictionary for hours as part of his new scheme to occupy Gully's mind profitably.

Once the triple-K rope and the GOLDEN RULE radiator were belted onto a dolly and safely deposited on the porch, Jerry launched his new plan on Gully. He would make Gully a research helper for his next trick. Of course he couldn't reveal what the trick would be because that would spoil the surprise. But Gully could help him do research, and even interpret the research in his own Gully way. He gave him four words to look up for the next trick: gravity, muzzle, browbeat, and torpid. Gully wrote down the words carefully, spelling them gravyt, musle, brallbeat, and torepeed. Then Jerry dismissed him and lugged the rope and radiator up to his invention room, with the unknowing Mrs. Bill still out enjoying her walking tour. Jerry wrote down the first four words Gully was to look up, then stored them in a folder marked "Words On His Mind."

For the next two weeks Jerry worked diligently on his new trick. He measured exact distances, did precise calculations, weighed and reweighed specific objects on the bathroom scale in his invention room, and even built a working model out of toothpicks, thread, a four-penny nail, and clay. The model
failed again and again because the thread kept breaking, then Jerry had a bright idea. He held several strands of thread together by the ends in both hands, dropped all but the ends of the threads in a pan of glue, then twisted them together fiercely and pulled outward just hard enough but not too hard until the glue dried. He tied one end of this reinforced thread to a perfectly molded mound of clay, and the other end to the four-penny nail lodged in a makeshift door formed out of several overlapping rows of toothpicks glued together. The nail served as a doorknob, but of course could not be turned without actually breaking the door. The trick model worked three times in a row, with the edge of a picnic bench representing the windowsill, the toothpick door splattering all over the floor each time.

By Friday, Jerry was so exhausted from the excitement that he put aside the trick model and spent much of the day watching over his mother from his invention room window.

Mrs. Bill spent much of Friday praying under Jerry's invention room window. She had heard Jerry pounding away for weeks. He had never been so preoccupied with an invention, and he would give her no details about it. She assured him again and again that, even though the new invention was in the nominal stage, it would be the Patented Big One. He agreed. She prayed for the complete success of his invention, and, since her growing season was just beginning, she prayed for all of her recently planted vegetables. This was a particularly spiritual season of the year for her. She was offering a special litany for her asparagus this year.

That evening Jerry and Mrs. Bill had a conversation.

"I think," began Mrs. Bill, "that our Mr. Pulver has had quite enough time to prove himself, don't you think?"

Jerry could feel his heart pounding in the backs of his knees.
"It has been one month now, and The Daily Chronicle has arrived late FOUR times. And from what I hear," she said pointedly, "Mr. Pulver spends far too much time here during his collection rounds."

"But," said Jerry, "you know how boys are, he's just easily distracted. He doesn't realize what's really going on in the world." His throat felt lemony.

"Yes Gerald," agreed Mrs. Bill, "I know how boys are." She had heard from a somewhat reliable neighbor that Mr. Pulver and Gerald spent an inordinate amount of time talking on the front porch together while she prayed in the garden for Gerald’s inventions. She had also heard that weeks ago they had returned from somewhere together with a threatening, dark, machine-like object in Gerald’s red wagon, and the boy had ridden off on his bike with what looked like an unpaid bill clenched in his little fist. That was all Mrs. Bill needed, for her son and a playmate to be off frolicking somewhere running up unpaid bills for machines when she spent so much time praying for her son’s inventions! If there was one thing she wouldn’t stand for it was a lack of respect for her efforts.

"Yes," said Mrs. Bill. "Tomorrow I believe I will discharge Mr. Pulver."

Jerry was frantic. He raised his voice. Gully would be crushed, he screamed. She was going straight to Hell, he assured her. Straight to sinner’s Satan succulent Hell, where she would be rubbed between the Devil’s fingers like a dirty match. Where she would hoe and hoe forever and not even a weed would sprout.

Mrs. Bill was shocked. Her son had never raised his voice to her like this since Mr. Bill had died. He had always known his place and known when to keep his mouth shut. His association with this Mr. Pulver had stifled his naturally
submissive personality.

“You would do well,” she warned, ignoring Jerry’s flailing arms, “to keep silent on matters you know nothing about.” If Jerry had not been an atheist, Mrs. Bill knew exactly what she would have done. “Jesus loves the humble of heart,” she would have quoted from the Bible, “and you must honor thy mother as yourself.” But there was no sense in discussing faith with the blind. Mrs. Bill was deeply hurt.

Jerry banged his way out of the parlor room and locked himself in his invention room, whimpering softly. He broodingly uncoiled the triple-K rope from its designated spot near the door, then yanked it between his hands and gnawed it with his teeth. He looked out the window down at the moonlit garden and saw Mrs. Bill tied to a huge, curved, iron plow by Gully with the very rope he was biting on. He covered her with honey and cockleburs. A headlight was strapped to her forehead. Gully butted Mrs. Bill from behind with his banana bike, and she trudged along like a machine, plowing her own damn garden, while Jerry bounced around the perimeters of the garden throwing handfuls of pennies at her face.

“Take that, you machine!” Jerry said.

Soon her cheeks were filled with deep silver scars. Broccoli florets writhed in her hair. Mushrooms bled from her false teeth.

“You killed my father, you filthy machine!” he said.

When his mother finally began crying and Gully’s little legs were sore, Jerry went to his bedroom and threw himself into bed.

He fell asleep pretending to tell Gully about his father. Mr. Bill had died of anorexia nervosa nineteen years earlier, Jerry told Gully, long before any movie star had made it famous. When his father had gone off to the hospital to die for the last
time, they invaded his body with more and more experimental tubes, until Jerry wasn't allowed to visit him anymore. As a child, Jerry dreamed of him again and again, always as a melting skeleton of a man in a wooden chair connected to a cold, gray machine by colorful, pulsating tubes and wires, his father's hooded eyelids bulging and winking shut like a frog's with each pulse of fluid through the tubes. Jerry woke from the dreams screaming. Mrs. Bill used to stand at the foot of his bed and listen to Jerry's screams in silence, then solemnly return to her own heavy slumber. Finally when Jerry was thirteen the dreams had stopped, and since then neither Jerry nor Mrs. Bill had mentioned them.

And now, the night before the last trick he could ever play on Gully, Jerry dreamed again of Mr. Bill. He and his father huddled on the rickety bleachers of a high school football stadium littered with vegetables, the sky glazed over with vanilla icing, dust blowing into their open mouths with each gust of wind. Jerry carried his father down the creaking bleachers, strapped him to the dolly, and wheeled him squeakily around the cinder track until they came to a large, humming radiator. They warmed themselves at the radiator, and Mr. Bill magically pulled long pussy willow branches and marshmallows from the pockets of his flannel shirt. Then Gully flew over them, high above the bleachers, skimming just below the tasty sky, flapping his fat arms and wheezing. They called to Gully to come down and roast marshmallows, but he kept circling around and around, ice falling from his chest in chunks. Mr. Bill looked up into Jerry's eyes and said, "Aren't we all each other's children?" Then his face became translucent and quietly melted into his skull, seeping entirely into his eye sockets with a quick, slurping sound. The radiator taxied across the football field, spraying lime over the sidelines,
and flew after Gully, hissing a floating, obscure piano-tune from Jerry’s childhood. Mrs. Bill sat in the pressbox above the bleachers like a dark, featureless stone.

“Come back,” Jerry called out. “Come back!”

“Gerald, are you crying?” his mother said, standing at the foot of his bed.

Jerry blinked and sat up in bed, stunned fully awake.

“Mama!” he sobbed. “I had another dream about Dad!”

Mrs. Bill stood unmoving, with the moonlight streaming through the window just missing her face. Jerry’s screams had awakened her from an unreflective sleep. She waited several seconds before speaking, calculating exactly what to say.

“Just close your eyes tight,” she said, “and concentrate on the darkness.”

It was the same advice she had given him when he was toilet training.

She shuffled back to her room in her bedroom slippers, and Jerry lay awake all night with her advice swishing back and forth in his head to the tune of an overly slow “Row, Row, Row, Your Boat.”

Saturday morning Mrs. Bill jumped out of bed and greeted the sunny day with open arms. She bustled around her room putting on her work clothes, whistling to herself; she could almost feel her vegetables growing within her very soul. It was a perfect day for prayer, she thought. She envisioned herself standing under Jerry’s window like Joan of Arc, wishing all of her enemies a blessed Saturday morning.

Jerry moved around his invention room mechanically, acting out of an impulse to make his final trick a lesson for
Gully that the boy would never forget. He had a firm sense of purpose now. Like a father. He had primed Gully for this day for weeks, adding fate, deputize, legitimist, tension, oppossum, languish, and sway to his list of “Words On His Mind.” It was important that Gully realize their vital kinship now and understand the true stuff that magic was made of.

He nailed the edges of the naugahyde backing from his father’s wheelchair to the bottom of the door as a brace, then strung the triple-K rope under the brace and double-knotted the rope around the inside doorknob of his invention room. He double checked to make sure the deadbolt was securely thrown, then pounded thirteen pennies all along the doorway between the door and the frame. Then he tapped all of the pins from the hinges. The door was now held in place only by the pennies and the deadbolt. He stood in the middle of the room and pulled on the rope, but both the brace and the door held. Then he wound the other end of the rope through the windows of the GOLDEN RULE radiator, and tied the rope back to itself in a triple friendship knot.

When Mrs. Bill left her praying beside the garden to answer Gully's knock at the parlor room door, Jerry lowered the extension ladder through the window, then climbed out onto it. He reached back into the room and heaved the radiator up to the windowsill, then carefully lowered it till it dangled out the window from the triple-K rope attached to his invention room door. The radiator hung from the creaking rope just a few feet below the windowsill, swaying back and forth like a reliable pendulum. One of the pennies popped from its place around the door frame, bowing to the tension. Jerry scrambled down the ladder and silently hung it back in the garage where it belonged. The ladder was not a regular fixture of his invention room.
When Jerry got to the parlor room, Gully looked strangely thin and deflated, as if Mrs. Bill had let all the air out of him with one jab of a pin. She handed him her final payment and told him she trusted that this would teach him a valuable lesson about responsibility. Then she bustled back to her gardening and prayer. Jerry put his hand on Gully’s shaking shoulder, and Gully looked up into his eyes and beheld the strength there. Jerry was his father. A better father than he had ever had. Together they walked up the steps holding hands.

“This,” whispered Jerry, “is my magic room. Inside you will find all that dreams are made of.” He dangled the key to the invention room door in front of Gully’s little face. On the door was the sign “Inventions... While You Wait” that Jerry had bought from Coco Bunner and hung for his mother’s sake.

The key sang happily in Gully’s hand as he inserted it into the keyhole. Jerry stepped back from the door and closed his eyes, picturing the scenario about to unfold. Gully would turn the key, throwing the dead bolt, and the weight of the GOLDEN RULE radiator would yank the invention room door across the room and send it crashing through the window. Then the suction would lift him and Gully through the window, and they would fly off together on top of the magic door to join his father and roast marshmallows forever.

When Gully turned the key in the lock Jerry’s eyes yanked open. The door hung suspended for a moment, then fell forward with a small puff. Gully screamed in delight and clapped his hands over his mouth. Sunlight trumpeted through the open window across from the doorway, illuminating the frayed end of the broken triple-K rope lying on the dusty floor. It had not proven to be as reliable a rope as Coco had promised. The GOLDEN RULE radiator had dropped of its own weight.
Jerry glided over to the window, picked up the listless end of the broken rope, summoned a sufficient amount of remorse, and looked down over the windowsill at his mother. She lay thickly next to the garden, steam rising from her body. The radiator had struck her squarely on the forehead; her end had been instant and unthinking. Gully slipped up under Jerry’s arm as Jerry stared down at his mother, his eyes brimming over in a paroxysm of ice, trickling down to melt all of his radiator dreams asleep.