The Deer in the Mirror

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At first, Reed Seever enjoys harassing the woman preacher, the Reverend Lori Lyles, especially since the Admiral, the church’s leading member, pays him so well to do it. Reed thinks of it as arts and crafts. He mixes corn syrup with red food coloring, and ta-dah: blood. He sneaks in when Lori Lyles is not at home, throws the red stuff all over her walls, and sloppy it onto her pastel rug. Inspired, he dips her toothbrush in the mixture and puts it back in its holder.

Lori Lyles is hardly ever home. She's out saving souls, finding people to bring to church to replace the members who decided right away they disliked her. She has offended in diverse ways: Her sermons are questions. She brought a busload of homeless people all the way from Washington, D.C. to a church picnic. These things will not be forgiven by her enemies, even though she supplied extra fried chicken.

Reed Seever is eighteen. He doesn’t consider himself anybody’s enemy. This is a game and he is the star. Everyone knows somebody is bothering the woman preacher, and everyone wonders who it is. Reed is a messenger, and his message is Get out, go. He is blood and thunder, hush and expertise, slipping in and out of her house. Lori Lyles could hire a security guard, people say. She could install a video camera. She doesn’t, and the talk turns ugly. She’s making it up, people say, doing these things herself.
At home, Reed freezes water in rubber gloves, then peels off the gloves. The frozen shapes look like udders. He experiments, using less water, tinting it pale blue, pinching the fingers with rubber bands, and the results thrill him: a ghost’s icy hands, the fingers slender, smooth, and eerie. Is it wrong to be proud of making something so beautiful? With a sharp knife, he scores the palms, creating life lines and heart lines. He takes a bottle of his mother’s nail polish and paints the tips of one hand pale pink. He makes half a dozen of the ice hands, packs them in a thermal sack, takes them to the manse, and places them in Lori Lyles’s freezer.

He dumps her dresser drawers and strews garbage throughout the house. For months he has tormented a woman so gentle he could never justify it, except he’s making more money than he’s ever dreamed of, enough to start a life with his girlfriend, Amber, as soon as she turns eighteen, of course. Yet he has reached a point where he wants to stop bothering Lori. The money is no longer enough.

Afterward he goes to the Admiral’s estate to do his regular job as a farmhand. He bush hogs all afternoon, clearing fields for the Admiral’s prize cattle. At sundown, he knocks on the door of the amazing house. It’s Saturday—payday. Even as he waits on the breezy, lovely porch, he knows he’ll remain in the Admiral’s power.

Sometimes a servant answers the door, a man Reed guesses is an actual butler, the kind of person you see in movies. There is a Mrs. Admiral, but Reed has never seen her. She must live upstairs, doing whatever rich women do.

This evening the Admiral himself welcomes Reed into the entrance hall. The walls are hung with portraits of tight-lipped people with funny hair. A marble-topped table holds a crystal vase of roses. Reed is thirsty, yet he can’t ask for anything here, not even a drink of water. Smiling, the Admiral reaches for his wallet.

“Did you propose to your girlfriend yet? Buy a ring?” he asks.

How exactly the Admiral found out about Amber, Reed does not know, except there’s no keeping secrets in this crossroads where only a hundred people live. The nearest town, where Reed goes to school, is five miles away.

“Not yet.” He doesn’t want the Admiral to know Amber is only fifteen. The Admiral could have him arrested for statutory rape. The vase of roses might contain a tiny camera that records Reed’s sins but never the Admiral’s.
“Your work’s not over, Reed. Keep at it till our preacher lady’s gone. Lock stock and barrel gone, tires squealing on the road gone.” The Admiral squints. “Understand, boy. I have a direct telephone line to God. That woman’s been blocking it for a whole year. Bringing a bus full of bums to the picnic. Alienating folks that have belonged to our church for generations. I want my telephone line cleared away.”

Reed pictures Lori Lyles, blonde and fragile, on a wire suspended between the Admiral’s house and the sky. He can hear her sweet laugh. She and Amber are friends, never mind Amber is half her age. Every Sunday evening, Amber goes to the manse and does Lori’s nails, a ritual Amber started, something for Lori to look forward to.

“Do we still have a deal?” the Admiral asks.
Reed nods, looking down at the polished floor.

“Don’t tell me,” the Admiral says, “you haven’t enjoyed this. It’s every boy’s dream to do a little mischief and get away with it. Lori Lyles oughta be a stripper, with a name like that.”

Reed is tired. The motion of the bush hog is still in his body, and he’s itching from poison ivy and mosquito bites.

“Why, if we complain too much to the bigwigs,” the Admiral continues, “they’ll start sending a rotten minister every time. A little country church has to be careful about complaining. You could wind up with a coon. Or a queer. No, we’ll let her leave on her own, and we’ll ask the bishop, real polite, to find us a nice fella like Reverend Wakefield.”

Reverend Wakefield, Lori Lyles’s predecessor, passed away just before a long-planned fund raiser, Celtic Day. Reed can still hear him say, “It’s keltic, not seltic.” Reverend Wakefield lined up cloggers and bagpipers, then died, and Celtic Day was canceled.

“We’ll have our Celtic Day yet,” says the Admiral.

Reed feels transparent around this man. The Admiral’s mind is quick, never mind he’s old enough to have spots on his hands and warts on his eyelids. He’s retired CIA, plantation owner, the most powerful man in the church, in the whole community. Reed was fourteen when he started working for him. Years of labor after school and on weekends have made Reed strong, but right now, the histamines whirling around in his system have dazed him. Peppermint-sized welts rise on his skin.

“When you get ready to buy an engagement ring,” the Admiral says, “go to Jerry’s Jewelers in Culpeper and tell them I sent you.”

“Oh. Okay.”
“One more thing. Have you noticed how noisy it’s gotten around here in the morning, with all those trucks from the gravel pit?”

“Yes.” The trucks are loud enough to drown out the birdcalls Reed is trying to learn.

“That noise will stop,” the Admiral says. “Today I bought that quarry and shut it down. When I can hear traffic way up here, this far back from the road, then it’s too damn loud.”

“Wow. That’s cool.”

The Admiral is nimble as a magician, the way he can give money to Reed and put the wallet back in his pocket. There is a lot of money in Reed’s hand, so much it would make wind if he fanned the bills.

The Admiral waves toward the door, and Reed understands he is dismissed. He’ll go home, take a cold bath, swallow three Benadryls, and lie down with the breeze puffing through the open windows. His father’s not home. He’s working construction over in Sterling and staying in a trailer on the site. Reed will drift off, then wake up and eat whatever’s handy. He ought to use some of the Admiral’s money to buy steaks, but he’s itching too bad.

Imagine being able to buy a quarry and shut it down just to make mornings quiet.

The little house Reed shares with his father, along the bend of the river but high enough that floods don’t reach it, used to quake when trucks from the granite pit snarled past. All of a sudden, no trucks. Morning silence, except for the train, which he has never minded.

Silence, and he wakes early to watch the birds.

Nothing like a river and woods for birds. He writes down their calls in a notebook he uses for school. Birds have their own phonics. *Three-eight* (vireo). *Turtle, turtle, turtle* (cardinal). The illustrated bird books, borrowed from the library, disappoint him. Those with photos tend to skimp on information, and the ones with drawings don’t get colors right, especially rufousness.

His mother loves birds too. He misses her. Several months ago, she went to D.C. to visit her sister, though Reed realizes his parents have separated. Do they think he doesn’t know? He worries about his mother. Just last week, a woman beside her at an IMAX theater was murdered, shot for talking.

“It was me who was talking, not her,” Reed’s mother told him later on the phone. “The movie was about Australia. There was a mother koala bear going up a tree with her baby on her back. Bassoon music was playing.”
The murderer told police the loudmouth was sitting behind him. He mocked her voice: “Look at the baby,” she’d said about the koalas. “I said that,” Reed’s mother tells him. She was babysitting her niece and nephew. Reed dislikes those whining toddlers with their sippy-cups.

“Mom, come home,” Reed begged. “You almost got killed.”

“Can you drive up here? Come visit me,” she said.

Reed said, “Maybe I can,” but his truck needs work, and his mother may as well be on the other side of the world. He doesn’t go. He may never go.

Two weeks till graduation. Didn’t the Admiral make his offer right after Reed’s mother left? The Admiral knew Reed would be too weak to refuse. Reed is nobody, just a country boy who watches birds. The Admiral dangled bait, and Reed bit.

At first, he thinks the letters are a hoax. They appear in his locker, folded up and stuffed through the metal vent. *I am mad for you Let me know if there is any hope (signed) U.M.*

*Reed Seever I want to spend time with you U.M.*

Una Manchester? The math teacher and girls’ soccer coach who is thought to be a dyke? Thought of gently, with the acceptance a small community grants to a few eccentrics.

It can’t be her. Somebody else must be sending the notes, writing (signed) as if the whole thing is a joke. Ms. Manchester—Coach Manchester—has won all the teaching awards, hitching up her pants and accepting fruit baskets and plaques from the PTA. When asked for a speech, she’ll say, “Aw, jeez, can’t I just eat this pineapple?” and the crowd roars with glee.

*Reed Seever you are not like anybody else I cant stop thinking about you.*

Una Manchester teaches dummy math to tenth and eleventh graders. She limps from a long-ago injury. Girls and guys, too, copy her swagger, the romance of it, the gait of a sailor home from the sea. Reed has her for a study period. When she signs his hall pass, the blood creeps up in her big cheeks. She wears her hair in a mullet, short on top and long in back. He has seen women like her on highway work crews.

Yet he notices her hands are as smooth as the ice hands. Her cheekbones and lashes look feminine, never mind her low brows and acne scars. She meets his eyes, and her gaze is full of love. He has seen that look in Amber’s eyes and felt it in his own.

“Hey Reed,” she says, “got any gum?”
“No. Sorry.” He is sure his ears are red.

Three or four soccer players run to her desk with Juicy Fruit, Chiclets, and Bazooka. “Doesn’t anybody have teaberry?” she asks. The girls giggle. Coach’s laughter is a honk.

Just like that, teaberry’s the hot flavor among all the kids. You can get it at the Walmart up in Culpeper.

You wonder if its me. You know it is

From the end of the long hallway, he sees Ms. Manchester’s brawny form at his locker. He waits until she’s gone, then opens the locker.

Come to my apt. I am almost always there except when I am here. Or at away games

She lives near the school, five miles by beautiful country road from Reed’s house. He has seen her working on her truck, her head beneath the hood. She is huge, bursting out of cut-offs. She has led her soccer team to state quarterfinals three years in a row, and she vows, Next year they will be champions, her girls will bring home the trophy. She calls it a loving cup.

Or we can meet in the empty house just let me know when

She means a sagging, one-room structure, rumored to be an early Freedman’s Bureau academy, at the back of the school lot. Reed spends a lot of time trying to figure out how old the building might be so he won’t have to think about the note. Kids claim slaves were chained there. Spiny weeds spring from the dirt floor. Would Coach bring a blanket? Which one would lie on their back? He would, of course. What would they talk about after sex? He and Amber talk about school. Birds. With Coach, what else but soccer strategies?

I want to take you to parradice

He tells nobody about the notes. There is rarely any need to tell anybody anything, and nobody but Amber asks him about himself. Not even Amber knows he’s the person plaguing Lori Lyles. Only the Admiral knows.

Be my loving cup Every game this year was for you

Ms. Manchester takes up space in his head that he wants to devote to Amber.

They always say it happens when your not looking for it well I wasn’t and here you are

After graduation, other students will be off to James Madison or Old Dominion, George Mason or Virginia Tech. Reed won’t even be going to Germanna Community College.

“Is something wrong, Ms. Manchester?” next year’s champions ask. They wear their soccer jerseys even though the season’s over, proud of rips and
Leaves. They say, “You look so sad, Ms. Manchester.” Coach must have a girlfriend who has broken her heart. It’s all right to be gay. There are some fairly cool lezzies in school, though not on the soccer team.

Coach hulks at her desk, lumpen, marking quizzes. The girls’ minds are lip gloss, halter tops, menstrual calendars. Coach Manchester’s mind is a vault.

Touch me and watch me explode

He buys Lori’s dogs’ silence with Spam—a bluetick hound and a dachshund that eyes his ankles but never bites. Lori has nightlights all over her house, like fireflies hovering at the sockets. So: switch them around. The star-shaped one from the kitchen goes in the hallway. A shamrock moves from bathroom to bedroom. Depending on how observant a person is, they might not even notice these little changes. And why not plug in all the appliances? This is an electrical service call. Blender, Crock-Pot, toaster. Plug them in so they’re ready if the owner would like to use them. The Reverend has left a pint of strawberries in the sink. He eats one, but it tastes green and bitter. He pours the berries into the blender with milk and sugar, whirls it to froth, and drinks. Much better.

He’s gently creative this time, just letting her know somebody was here. He lifts a framed drawing from the wall and rehangs it upside down. Closes a door that is open: kitchen cupboard. Opens a closed one: linen cabinet. The dogs follow him through the house. In her bedroom, he tosses her pillow on the floor. It would be so easy to lift the pillow to his face, to smell it and think about her tears, but he won’t.

He plucks a purple iris from a vase and drops it into her toilet, where it floats, so pretty.

Back in the kitchen, he checks her freezer, and yes, the ice hands are still there, the ghost hands glacially blue and delicate, though some of the fingertips are chipped off. The hands are scattered among bags of frozen vegetables, as if she has not even noticed they are there.

As he steps outside—so bold, now, he uses the front door, though the manse opens onto a deserted, fallow field—he hears a bird call his name: “Reed Seever, Reed Seever!”

It’s Sunday. Church is over, and Lori Lyles is out on her rounds, taking home the people she brought as guests in the morning. The spring air smells of flowers and earth, with a tang of manure from neighboring farms. Reed breathes as if he’s never breathed before. There’s no sound except the river’s chuckling as it flows around the bend, the only bird a bunting disappearing
Ice Hands

into a pine. He did not imagine a bird calling him. He heard plain as day Reed Seever from an avian throat, Reed Seever from a clever craw, Reed Seever.

Reed Seever I write your name over and over
The weekends are so long
I have secrets and so do you I can tell

Two girls never seem to graduate: Constance and Patience. They’re in study hall with Reed. They have been seniors forever. They call themselves Connie and Pattie now—Connie and Pattie whispering, dowdy, swapping recipes and passing notes in silent hysteria, their clothes the garments of older days, their faces wrinkled as seashells. Their hair, worn in buns, might be blonde, or has it gone gray? Coach Manchester and the champions pay them no mind. Reed imagines Constance and Patience back in the days when women were Biddy this and Biddy that. Bonneted and busy-tongued, that’s Constance and Patience. They whisper in his dreams. They might be spell-casters, mixing potions of afterbirths and toenail clippings. They might be bakers of bread, stirrers of tallow and soap, herding animals to pasture, shooing children from yard to supper table, awake all night in a garret shared by owls. Constance and Patience: spiders and the wrapped prey of spiders, bound and sealed in a web.

They sit in study hall as if they’re ever seventeen, when they must be a hundred, their gingham dresses made of homespun cloth. Their gestures are urgent, their tales only for each other. From farthest memory he dredges up surnames: Greenthorn and Heth, though which is which? Do they talk of men, of assignations and encounters? If he could get a good look at their fingertipps, he would find needle pricks, for surely they stitch samplers by lamp-light. Yet here they are, Biddy Greenthorn, Biddy Heth, smack dab among next year’s champions, among black girls dancing in their desks, swanning their arms into the air and squealing a sorority chant: “Oop, oop.” Guys look right through Constance and Patience, but isn’t that the fate of frumps? This disregard is not proof that Constance and Patience don’t exist. Reed could try the old trick, a leg in the aisle, but they’re never close enough to trip.

The bell will ring, and these ancients will hurry off to flit about the darkening commons of a colonial hamlet, flying up and down smoky alleys while a town crier marks the hour, but they’ll be back tomorrow in their corner, voices so low nobody hears them but Reed Seever, his ears attuned to bird-calls: Biddy Greenthorn and Biddy Heth inaudible, invisible, as Reed himself is invisible to everybody except Amber and now Coach with her fleshy ears and scoping gaze.
Sticks of teaberry gum turn up in his locker, sweet and musty as rambling roses.

*Oh darling*

*Darling tell me you want me*

Reverend Lori Lyles drives her beaten Pontiac all over the countryside, collecting black people and white people and the occasional Mexican, her foundlings, and never mind if they fall asleep in the pews. She goes to Lignum and True Blue, Radiant and Ruckersville, all the way to Wolf Town. She knows the way to Zion Crossroads and Syria, and the mountain roads to Sperryville. She gets to church later and later. Amber tries to cover for her, persuading the cranky organist to play extra hymns, while old established families, the Bannisters and the Talbots, consult their watches, rise in patrician disgust, and depart. Lori’s followers are dwindling to a bare handful of the prosperous and influential, plus Amber, whose family is as poor as Reed’s and thus who hardly counts.

Reed’s at church every Sunday. It’s a chance to be with Amber, to sit beside her and hold her hand. The Admiral is never there. He is boycotting the church. Reed doesn’t doubt that someday soon, Lori Lyles will be gone, and the Admiral will return, gloating.

The church door is a rectangle of light in the back of the sanctuary. Every Sunday, Lori shows up eventually, shaking and pink-cheeked, her Pontiac disgorging her uncertain guests, whom she leads inside triumphantly.

“It’s a glorious day,” she says, “when we can welcome new friends to our church home.”

Reed pictures her complicated, winding routes. What does she say to get people in the car? Do they run from the urgent young woman flinging open the passenger door and patting the seat beside her? Who are these people, rounded up like stray cats? Some are deformed or garrulous or silent, in dirty clothes, sometimes barefoot. After services she packs them back into her car, and off they go. Do they still exist for Lori when Sunday is over, when she sprawls exhausted on her sofa with Amber painting her nails for her?

“All of you know what’s happening to me,” she says from the pulpit, and the congregation fidgets, even the strangers. “Somebody’s trying to scare me off. Breaking into my house. Well, I quit locking my door a long time ago. I’m here, and I’m not scared. My God is with me.”

Afterward she lingers outside, her strays milling around the grassy yard. With Amber’s hand in his, Reed says, “Can I ask you something?”
“Ask me anything.” Lori’s hazel eyes, with thick pale lashes, make him think of dandelions.

“How did you decide to do this?” he asks. It’s easy to be friendly with her. It’s some other self that goes into her house and does those things.

“You mean, did I get a call from God?” Lori says. “I did.”

“What was that like?”

She says, “A low hollow sound, like a voice down a chimney. I heard it every night for a year. I knew what it was.”

She reaches out and squeezes Reed’s and Amber’s clasped hands. Reed thinks of the ice hands, and chills tingle down his back. She says, “Sweet little folks.”

Amber reaches up and hugs her, hanging on her neck, making a sound like a sob, but only for a moment. Lori pats her arm.

“Do you still hear the voice?” Reed asks.

“No,” Lori says, “but I wouldn’t expect to. Now I’m answering it.”

A horn is blowing. They turn around to see a roughneck Lori brought to church, sitting in her Pontiac, honking. Others are running wild, men and women and kids, chasing each other and wading in the river.

“Do you need us to help you?” Amber offers.

“That’s okay. You dears run along,” Lori says.

In early June, the Admiral asks, “How’s our Reverend doing these days?”

“She’s a nice lady,” Reed dares to say. “Her and my girlfriend are friends.”

“I don’t want to hear about nice.” The Admiral’s eyes make Reed think of cigarette butts. “Look, boy, it’s spring. She’ll be gone by blackberry season. Oh, the blackberry pies my mother used to make. You get old, you think about your mama’s pies. I think about those pies more than pussy. Those vines are still out in the woods, same ones I picked as a boy. Get trapped in them, and they’ll cut you to pieces.”

“I know what you’re doing, and whose dirty work it is,” Amber tells Reed. “You’re the person bothering her. Is the Admiral paying you that much?”

For a long time, he is silent. They’re at his house, on his bed. He has done these things, and Amber knows, and now he will have to say.

“I’m saving up so we can buy a house. When we’re married.” It’s the first time he’s ever said married to her. “How did you know?”

“Maybe I’ve always known,” Amber says. “How can you be so bad to her?”
“The money’s for you, for us, so we can be together.”

His hands are in her hair. He can never quite picture her soft, limp hair when he’s away from her. She had let him draw her toward the bed like nothing was wrong. Now she pushes him away.

“How can you stand yourself?” she asks. “You’re a criminal.”

“Does she know? Have you told her it’s me?”

“I’ve wanted to.”

“This is for her own good,” Reed says. “She’d be better off somewhere else.”

“That’s the Admiral talking, that son of a bitch.” Amber never curses. In profile, her face is a grown-up’s, with shutters across it. “Leave her alone.”

“It won’t be much longer.”

Reed’s heartbeat fills his ears. Amber will end it, and the money he has saved will feel too dirty to spend on anything. Amber could say, “You’ve changed,” and it’s true. Persecuting Lori Lyles has made him creative. He could swap her dogs for curs he whistles into his truck from fields and berms, packing the manse with starved creatures that would maul her when she opened her door. He’ll see lobsters at a grocery store and imagine leaving one in her bathtub for the hell of it. The devilment is an infection in his heart.

“Amber,” he says, “it’ll be over soon, and I won’t do anything like this again.”

“You spy on the manicures.”

He thinks of Amber rubbing lotion into Lori’s knuckles. “I’m sorry.”

“I could see doing what she’s doing, some day. Being a minister.”

“You’re not her,” he says. “Be you.”

Her gaze is far-off, yet she reaches for him and unbuttons his shirt.

“Amber,” he says, startled by her light hands stripping him. She’s a wind lifting him off the ground. She doesn’t speak the whole time, except for sighs.

Afterward she says, “Your mom and dad won’t be at graduation, will they?”

“I think they’ve forgotten.” He waits for her to say, I’ll be there. She doesn’t.

I was late to home room because Stairway to Heaven was on the radio and I sat in my car and thought of you

At the manse, a bird opens its beak, and out comes the sound of a ticking clock. Reed slips leashes on Lori’s dogs. He leads them outside and into his truck. The dogs are skittish, but they settle down as he eases onto the road.
Back at his house, he plugs in a tape recorder. How to get them to bark? They are quiet, wagging their tails. Maybe a game of Frisbee? He takes them out in the yard and sets the tape recorder on the grass. He throws the Frisbee, and the dogs fly for it. He’ll play the tape to Lori’s answering machine, calling from the pay phone at the grocery store. Lori will recognize the voices of these warm critters that sleep on her bed. He’ll return the dogs tomorrow.

The tape recorder, a 1970’s model with a mildewed vinyl case, was his mother’s when she was a kid. He presses a button to hear what he will be recording over. His mother’s voice startles him. There is his father’s voice, too, and his own. They’re talking about a yard sale. He remembers that. He was about seven.

*How much for this fan? A dollar?*

*It’s all rusty. A quarter. Hey Reed, you wanna sell your old toys?*

*Sure. Well, I don’t know.*

*You don’t have to, honey.*

He plays it again to hear the little hitch in his mother’s voice when she says *dollar*. He doesn’t think they sold the fan. Isn’t it the same one he’ll plug in tonight? It will oscillate and give off its smell of electricity and oil.

He rewinds the tape and press *Record*. He’ll record the dogs’ barking right over the sound of his family’s voices. He feels only a little sick.

Nice dogs. Right on cue, they bark. Reed throws the Frisbee and they fetch until the Frisbee is slick from their spit. That must be enough. He clicks off the recorder. He turns on the hose and fills a bowl for the dogs.

Freak her out, to hear her own dogs’ voices on her phone. Even if she calls the sheriff—*Somebody stole my dogs*—well, the sheriff’s a friend of the Admiral’s, and he’ll be real courtly as he writes a report, just as he wrote up the fake blood, but she’ll know he’s laughing at her, Sheriff Sizemore all saunter and gut, king of firehall bingo.

Reed plays the tape. The dogs have barked enough, though the tape adds a whispery rush of its own. The air’s so sticky he can’t breathe. The dogs push at his knees, wanting more of the game. His mother’s fingers touched these keys. *Rewind. Fast forward. Stop.* She would be furious with him, no matter if he said, I’m so tired, Mom. Her anger hums in his hands.

“It’s not enough, Reed. Up the ante.” The Admiral jerks a thumb in the air.

“So now what?” Reed says. Why can’t he stand up to this man?

“Be resourceful,” the Admiral says. “My college roommate and I stapled plastic all over the walls and floor of another boy’s room, then filled it with
water and goldfish. I’ll never forget the look on his face when he opened his
tdoor.” The Admiral gives a soundless laugh. “Do you lack imagination?”

Reed shrugs, and the Admiral mocks him with a shrug surely known only
among the CIA brass, the most sinister gesture Reed has ever seen.

“I have something for you.” The Admiral goes to an enormous desk, opens
a drawer, lifts out a device, and hands it to him.

It’s heavy and cold, so shiny it reflects Reed’s face.

“A stun gun,” the Admiral says. “Ka-pow, and they stop in their tracks.”

Reed’s breath goes tight. He has used his father’s hunting rifle on tin cans,
but he has never shot a living thing. “How does it work? Is it loaded?”

“It’s always loaded. What is it Superman uses, kryptonite? Think of it as
kryptonite.”

Reed goes to the desk and slides the gun onto the blotter.

The Admiral says, “Take it. Put it somewhere only you know about.”

“It’s too creepy,” Reed says.

The Admiral minces, hand over heart. “Oh, creepy! It doesn’t hurt people
very bad. You could almost say the effects are momentary.”

“I’m always afraid she’ll come home and find me there,” Reed says.

“And if she finds you, you’ll kill her? Have your way with her?” The Admi-
ral’s belly-laugh would echo off a mountain. “You’d love it.”

“No,” Reed says, but it’s the

no

of a nightmare.

The Admiral holds the weapon toward him, speaking in a falsetto. “It’ll
talk to you, a little voice saying, Use me!”

“I won’t do it,” Reed says. “I’m done with this, you hear me?”

Yet he finds he is holding the gun, and the Admiral is smiling. Reed takes
the gun, leaves the house, and heads for the tractor shed.

There he wraps it in a horse blanket and puts it on a high shelf which
holds rusty saw blades and a broken vise. He doesn’t see these ordinary things
as tools anymore, only as the instruments of torture they could become. The
shed has always been a friendly place, unkempt and cobwebby, with vines
growing through cracks. Oil stains on the cement floor make patterns like
continents. Reed’s heartbeat shakes the walls. He tells himself he’ll never
come back, but the tractor is an old friend. It waits, knowing the high grass
will bring him again to its seat, to turn the familiar key.

In study hall, Reed doesn’t leave when the bell rings. He stays at his desk
while everybody else goes out, so only he and Coach Manchester are left. It’s
the last class of the last day of his last year in school. Tonight is graduation.
He picks at the hearts and obscenities carved into his chair. Finally he looks up.

Seated at her desk, Coach is a statue. For a long time, they regard each other. Outside, kids shout and skirmish. The cries fade, and he feels his life turning over like a lake when the weather changes. There will be something next, because there always is.

Reed clears his throat. “I’m in over my head,” he says, “way over.”

She pushes back her chair, bears her weary weight toward him until she’s beside him, and crouches down so her head is level with his knees. She smells like last year’s leaves. What big ears she has, big enough to hold all his secrets. Already he’s a distant figure in the Admiral’s fields, a farmhand who doesn’t have much to say. He has already disappeared. Coach blinks, her lids making a little click.

“The thing is,” he says, “I’ve pretty much sold my soul.” He puts out his hand, and she leans her cheek into his palm. “There’s this stun gun in a shed, and I don’t want to hear its voice.”

Coach opens her mouth, and out comes the song of a bird.