

Country Weekends

by Brian Downes

Early hadn't really seen Randy since Randy's arrest and subsequent failure to be convicted for possession of an illegal weapon. Early had called him once to offer his support in the maelstrom of media attention and justice system ineptitude, but Randy had growled into the phone, "I couldn't possibly talk to you right now, Early. Haven't you heard? I'm dangerous to know, and as your long time friend I can't in good conscience allow you to associate with me. Irreparable damage to your reputation," and severed the connection. Early had bumped into Randy once or twice after the scandal-that-wasn't had lost its integrity, but always when one was going in and the other coming out of somewhere. Randy had been full of his plans to move to Columbus, and his deepening relationship with Vera. He'd had no time for chitchat.

Then he'd moved to Columbus, and all Early had of him was the occasional e-mail, usually Clinton/Lewinsky jokes that Randy had merely forwarded. Why does Bill Clinton wear boxer shorts? To keep his ankles warm.

So it was with surprise that Early picked up his voice phone at home one evening and found Randy's voice issuing from the earpiece. "Catch you at home, you bugger?"

"No, I'm having my calls forwarded to the surveillance van."

"Which is parked . . .?"

"Outside your house."

"You cocksucker, I will *kill you*. In the most horrible, the most depraved way . . ."

Randy invited him down to Columbus for the weekend. Early accepted.

Early marveled at how he talked. He hadn't said anything like that surveillance van bit in years, or a space of time that seemed like years.

That Friday, he took off work early and took 271 south out of Cleveland towards Akron, and 71 south. Halfway to Akron his Monte Carlo rolled over its ten thousandth mile. The Monte had a black interior, the look and feel of which had sold Early on the Chevy. It made him feel like he was driving a luxury spaceship. After ten months at the realty company, he'd decided it was time for a new car. He'd arrived at the decision about the same time the senior partners had started asking him how long he'd owned his eight-year-old Cutlass.

Early rolled onto Randy and Vera's property at exactly six o'clock, and was parked outside the house by six oh four, having navigated half a mile of rutted gravel driveway that swung off the road and behind a row of screening trees before arriving at the relatively small house. His friends weren't in Columbus proper, but half an hour outside it. Early parked next to the F-150 pickup and the Cavalier in the driveway.

He got out of the car just as Randy opened the front door. A dog that was mostly German Shepherd came roaring out of the door at a dead run, headed straight for Early with such violence that he was sure it was going to attack him.

"You dumb fuck!" Randy yelled jubilantly, "How are we going to do any shooting with the light failing?"

It had become November two days ago, and the change in the calendar had brought a change in the weather. It had been a wet and misty Halloween, but the eleventh month of 1998 had come upon them clear and startlingly cold. The water on the grass was already fragile in anticipation of becoming frost.

"It's good to see you, too," Early yelled back over the clamor of the dog, which had skidded to a stop three feet away from the toes of his boots and begun barking at great volume and hesitant intervals.

"We'll turn on some headlights, that's what we'll do," Randy answered his own question. Early took his bags out of the car as the dog continued to bark. Randy didn't come out to help because he was barefoot, but he did hold the door open. "Did you bring a piece?"

"Do they still let you have one?" Early asked as he came in, and Randy muttered under his breath, "Enter freely and of your own will."

"I was never convicted of anything," Randy replied.

Randy's scandal had begun one night when he'd been awakened from sleep on the couch in his living room by the sound of glass breaking in the kitchen. Now which piece of glass was that? Randy wondered to himself. Then the noise of the door being unlocked from inside let him know it had been the piece set into his kitchen door as a window.

So Randy picked up the nine millimeter semiauto he customarily set on the end table at the foot of the couch if he was going to sleep downstairs, clicked the safety off and stood with his back to the wall at the head of the couch. This put him directly to the left of the kitchen doorway.

He heard the kid (for kid it would prove to be) fumble around with some minor items on the kitchen table. "Revealing himself as an inexperienced burglar," Randy would later say. "I mean, what the fuck was he stealing in the kitchen, paprika? So I tried to handle him gently, because inexperienced burglars tend to spook easily, and kill people for stupid reasons."

When the kid came into the living room, Randy went unnoticed until he put the muzzle of his gun behind the kid's ear.

"It was a singular act of kindness that I did not ruin my carpet right then," Randy later confided to Early, "and an unforgivable disservice to my species, Darwinistically speaking."

Randy asked the kid to lie down with his hands on his head, but the kid thought maybe he was a more famous Kid, and tried to put up a fight. Randy charitably pistol-whipped the kid instead of snuffing him, then had to pistol-whip him twice more to secure his full cooperation. It took lacerations that would need twelve stitches and some miscellaneous contusions to convince the kid to lie the fuck down and do as he was told.

The kid turned out to be the nineteen year-old son of a sheriff's deputy and nephew to the D.A. The kid already had one burglary conviction. Randy tried to have him put away, but the kid's family wanted him free.

"Randy, look," his lawyer, with whom he was on a first name basis, said, "any other kid, he'd already be in a cage. But the kid was unarmed, you beat the living hell out of him, and he's got heavy connections. You press charges, they'll countersue for menacing and assault. You might win, but it'll cost a year in court and forty thousand dollars. If you lose, we're talking stiff fines and a conviction that will turn up on every B.C.I. check for the rest of your life."

So Randy let it go. But it had turned out this was only the first vibrato in the shit rain sonata.

"Vera, you remember Early," Randy said.

"Hello, Early." Vera wore a black turtleneck, her silky brown hair in braids. She was framed in the kitchen doorway, and she looked as if she wasn't sure if she should admit to recognizing Early, or not. Her face was bright, as if she'd just scrubbed it.

"How are you, V?" Early asked. He extended his hand.

"Ow, are you friends or not?" Randy protested. "Give him a kiss, V."

Vera surprised Early by slipping her arms around his neck and kissing his cheek. "Same as ever, Early." She blushed. "It's good to see you."

Withdrawing, she asked Randy, "Is that the last of the coffee you're holding?"

Randy looked into the mug in his hand and said, "Uh —". Vera rolled her eyes and slipped into the kitchen.

Randy looked Early up and down. “That thing’s gotta be longer, if you’re going to throw it over a beam and hang yourself.”

“Damn. I forgot to take it off in the car,” Early smiled, fingering his necktie. “I knew you’d give me a hard time about it.”

“I’m gonna go get dinner,” Randy announced, after Early had deposited his things in the guest room and taken off his tie, and a fresh pot of coffee had been brewed and distributed, and Vera had gone off to inspect the guest room one more time. “You wouldn’t believe it, but we’ve got this great Thai carry-out in town. Is it still Dan Tucker that you drink?”

Early shook his head. “Wild Turkey.”

Randy set down his coffee mug and slapped his hands together vigorously, as if knocking the dust off them. “Okay,” he said, forestalling Early’s offer to go with him, “I’ll be back in a few minutes.” He took his keys from a peg next to the door and, having shod himself since he’d opened the door to Early, left.

Vera came back into the kitchen. “Where’d he go?”

“He just left to get dinner,” Early said. Vera snorted.

“This is a beautiful piece of land,” Early offered by way of a conversation starter.

“Isn’t it? We picked it up at government auction. The house is a little rough, but it’s nice. Randy likes it.”

“How’s he been?”

Vera laughed. “Himself. I think that business with the D.A. really upset him. I think he likes it down here because it’s quiet. He says he’s through with humans.” She looked at him. “How have you been?”

“Prosperous, actually. Doing very well for myself in real estate.”

“How’s Viv?”

“Gone completely around the bend by now, I’d predict. I haven’t seen her in four months.”

“Mmm. Randy said something about that. I’m sorry. I think.” She laughed. She was sitting in one of the kitchen chairs, and pulled one of her knees up to her chin with her cupped hands. “I’m never sure whether to say I’m sorry or congratulations when somebody tells me they’ve broken up.”

“Say both,” Early smiled. “I feel both ways.”

Her shyness returned, and she looked away.

Randy was gone fifty minutes. Then he came through the front door with his arms full of boxes of Thai carry-out, and a brown paper bag. “This stuff,” he said as he arrayed the little boxes on the kitchen table, “will peel the varnish right off this table. This stuff, too,” he added, brandishing the bottle of Wild Turkey.

“Randy, we’ve already got four bottles in the liquor cabinet,” Vera protested.

“Now we’ve got five,” Randy replied. “So, have you guys talked about everything?”

“We haven’t talked about everything, no,” Vera said quickly. She put a funny emphasis on *everything* that brought the conversation to a halt.

Randy popped open one of the take-out boxes. “Why don’t we eat?”

They ate the Thai, which peeled the varnish off Early’s lips and stomach. They also drank more than they intended. They couldn’t shoot while they were drunk, Randy said. They had to wait a couple of hours. They talked while they waited, and for the first time Early heard Randy’s account of the scandal. It was while they waited for the Wild Turkey to wear off that Randy said it was an act of kindness that he hadn’t ruined his carpet when he’d first poked that gun muzzle into the kid’s ear, and an unforgivable disservice to his species.

And for the first time, Early heard from Randy’s lips about the second act in his little tragedy.

Three months after the break-in, Randy was pulled over for a wired-together muffler by the same sheriff’s deputy who had fathered the bumbling burglar. “When that prick saw who I was — oh, the *only* tool he had was a hammer.” It was two thirty AM. Randy was driving home from Vera’s, from whence he had just been expelled for a reason both professed to have forgotten by the time the story was told to Early. Randy admitted that his mood had probably done nothing to ameliorate the situation.

The deputy took Randy’s belligerence as a reason to pat him down. He found Randy’s three-inch pocket knife and took that as probable cause to search the car. In the glove compartment, he found a plastic bag containing an ounce of dried and shredded herb.

“It’s oregano,” Randy said.

“Shut up, asshole!” The deputy barked. He swung the beam of his flashlight towards Randy’s back seat. One of his seats was folded down, revealing the open blackness of the trunk space. “What’s in the trunk?”

He found a sawed-off shotgun in the trunk.

Additionally, he found a denim jacket with more drugs in the breast pocket.

When Randy's lawyer woke up at seven that morning, he found a message on his voicemail. "Hey, Bert. 'S Randy. I've been arrested for possession of an illegal weapon, possession of marijuana, and possession of black market Hydrocodone. I'm in county, but go ahead and have breakfast. A friend of mine from high school is in here for pimping, and we've been catching up."

"Has he been charged?" His lawyer asked the duty sergeant a hundred and five minutes later. "Has he been charged? Is he *going* to be charged? Why?" Forty minutes later, Randy was free.

The press was waiting on the steps. An anonymous police source had called them about a newsworthy bust full of guns and drugs and antisocial personality types. The phrase "domestic terrorist" had been mentioned as one the source would almost use but not quite, so don't quote him.

A uniformed officer had been sent out to chase the press off while Randy was being released, but as every cop knows, once you touch the press, you can't let go.

"I would like to admit my guilt," Randy announced to the three or four reporters. "I kidnapped Mr. Lindberg's baby. I can only apologize abjectly to this community, and throw myself on the mercy of the court." Then he slammed his lawyer's car door in their faces.

"My lawyer didn't know whether to spit nickels or go blind," Randy said.

DRUGS, WEAPONS FOUND IN CAR

Was the headline the next morning. Randy looked very austere in the photo on the color front page. His blond hair was braided down his shoulders and he had a complexion like a speckled egg from spending a night without sleep in jail. He stood with one hand on the roof of his lawyer's Lexus.

How that headline appeared was never sorted out to anyone's satisfaction, save for the party or parties who were saved from the cleaver of a libel suit Randy's lawyer was lovingly polishing by the miasma of confusion and forgetfulness that surrounded the incident. A retraction was printed. Nobody who'd read the original article saw it.

"They had to release me, for the simple fact that I was innocent, innocent as a babe in arms," Randy said. This was a source of much disappointment to certain elements in the law enforcement community.

The herb in the bag in the glove compartment really was oregano. A few days before he was pulled over, Randy had been seized by the idea of cooking a huge pot of ravioli all at once, then eating it over the course of a week or two. He'd had this idea while over at Vera's; he knew he didn't have enough oregano at home, so he poured an ounce of hers into a sandwich bag.

In Ohio, the minimum legal required length for shotgun barrels is eighteen inches. Randy had sawn a pump down to eighteen inches even, with an accuracy of plus or minus one one-thousandth of an inch.

To be on the safe side, most short-barreled shotguns have barrels measuring eighteen and one quarter inches. It was these guns the sheriff's deputy was used to seeing; therefore, Randy's had seemed too short.

The denim jacket in which the "black market" hydrocodone had been found belonged to a friend of Randy's who had hurt his back working in construction. The friend's name was Luisham, Arthur. Luisham, Arthur, had taken the pills for two days before forgetting about them because his back felt better. When he accidentally left his jacket in the trunk of Randy's car, he accidentally left the pills. They were inside a prescription pill bottle with the name Luisham, Arthur on it, along with the date, the name of the doctor, and the name of the pharmacy.

The pocketknife was so trivial it was never mentioned again.

"But does this matter? Noooo. Because in this country, we are tried in the media, and don't ever forget it," Randy said.

Randy looked at his watch. "Midnight," he intoned.

Randy and Early drove their cars across the frost-stiffed grass to throw their headlights onto the side of a low hill a short distance away from the house, where Randy had erected four three-foot wooden stakes. Randy walked out and put styrofoam cups on top of the stakes. Then he came back to Early. They both put earplugs in. "Ready?" Randy asked, pulling his pistol from his belt. Early gestured for him to go ahead.

It was the coldest part of the night, and absolutely still. Steam puffed steadily from their mouths. The stars unrolled above them, and the moon was a heavy crescent lacquered into the sky.

Randy fired, and a small black dot appeared on one of the cups. Two more shots, two more black dots, and the fourth shot knocked the cup off of the stake. Randy stepped back and gestured for Early to go ahead. A distant dog was howling.

"This is really beautiful land," Early said as he took aim.

"Isn't it? Got it at government auction."

Bang! “Yeah, Vera mentioned that.” *Bang!*

“The guys who used to live here” *Bang!* “went to prison for growing weed on the property. A guy and his uncle.”

Early lowered his pistol and looked over his shoulder at his friend. “No kidding?”

“No kidding. Right down there in the streambed, and back in those trees,” Randy pointed here and there. Early thumbed his safety on and stepped back. Randy went forward.

Randy fired five shots, and shot the top two inches off a stake along with the styrofoam cup.

“I was wondering if you could do me a favor,” Randy asked, trying to count the holes in the mutilated cup as it lay partially concealed in the grass. “It’s about Vera.”

“Yeah? What?”

Randy turned around. “She wants a baby.”

There was silence. Randy grinned a cockeyed grin. Early squinted at him. Randy gestured for Early to step up to the firing line.

“Do you think you can help me out with that?” Randy asked after Early had missed everything but the hill four times, and turned around to face Randy again.

“What are you talking about, man?”

Randy ejected his clip, and thumbed the last round out into his hand. When Early had fired the first shots of the morning, a distant dog had started to howl. Another dog in a different direction had added his voice with each new volley. By now, they’d disturbed the sleep of the whole canine neighborhood. “Look, we’ve been together three years. One and a half in this house, now. I’m twenty-eight years old. She’s twenty-seven, and she wants to have a baby before she has to worry about being too old to do it.”

“Why doesn’t she have a baby with you?”

“Because I don’t want to have any babies,” Randy said sharply. “Do you remember Jackie?”

“Milhauser?”

“Uh-huh. And Caroline?”

“Yeah — ”

“And Ellie, and Rebecca? I went with all those ladies for at least a year, right? Sometimes a lot more. But they all left eventually. One way or the other,” He answered Early’s look. “Sometimes I left them, okay. But in this world, if there are any kids in your situation, they go with the woman when she leaves.”

He and Randy snapped their weapons back into their cases. “You can leave your car there,” Randy said. “It’ll be okay if you turn your lights off.”

Early turned off his Monte’s lights. Randy reached in the window of his F-150 and snapped his off. They were left with only the moonlight and what light reached them from the flood on the front of the house.

“So do you think V’s going to leave you?” Early asked.

“Not this week,” Randy said. “Not this month. But who knows about next year, or two years from now, or eighteen years from now?” Randy was silent a moment, thinking. “I can’t put myself in a situation where I have that little control. I couldn’t stand having the whole life I’d built subject to someone else’s whim.”

“Not even someone you love?”

Randy laughed at Early. “Especially not somebody I love. That strips me of all my defenses.”

They started back to the house, which now seemed to Early like a shipwreck on the bottom of the sea, unknown and strange.

Vera hadn’t planned on shooting, so she’d gone ahead and had another drink or two after Early and Randy had stopped. She’d been hanging on precariously as the night had waxed towards twelve, curled in a kitchen chair, her head nodding. When the men had gotten up to go outside, she’d gone to bed.

“Well, no bootie knocking tonight,” Randy said as he screwed the cap back on the Wild Turkey. Early gave him an appalled look. “I mean, V’s gone to bed.”

Early was still appalled. “I haven’t said yes.”

“I’m sorry. Of course you’re right. You haven’t said yes.” Randy put the bottle on the shelf with the other liquors. Half-sitting on the kitchen table, he faced Early. “I’m not saying you have to do it. I am saying it means a lot to Vera, and *she* wants to do it. She *wants* to do it,” he shifted his emphasis. “And it would mean a lot to me. And I’m okay with it. And it’s not like something like this hasn’t happened before. Remember Deidre?”

“Yeah, I remember Deidre,” Early smiled at the memory. Deidre was the central figure in a bawdy comedy that had happened late in their university careers, when they discovered

that they were both sleeping with her without realizing, as Randy had put it at the time, that the other was “grazing the same veldt.”

“I laughed so hard I choked,” Randy reminded him. “I laughed so hard I cried!”

“Uh-huh. Right after you kicked a hole in the wall.”

“Aww, that’s because I was feeling so insecure about Ellie,” Randy waved him off. “But it gave me the shove I needed to finally break up with her.”

“Okaaaay,” drawled Early. “With such a glorious precedent, what could go wrong?”

“No plan is perfect,” Randy muttered.

Early was glad that Randy had, in talking about Deidre, refrained from talking *about* Deidre. To mention her beauty, or her skill and daring as a lover, which neither could dispute, would have been . . . irrevocable.

He was doubly glad Randy hadn’t mentioned any of Vera’s attributes. Her beauty was obvious. Her skill as a lover Early preferred only to speculate about.

“It was terrible,” Vera heard Randy say the next morning, as she made her way through the living room to the kitchen. “I mean, it’s like fighting Jello. Ever read *The Fountainhead*, by, uh, uh — ”

“Ayn Rand,” Vera said as she took a seat at the table, rubbing sleep from her eyes.

“It was just like that. “Oh, Roark? Don’t hire him. There was some scandal.” “What scandal?” “I don’t remember. But don’t hire him.” I lost clients, my mother caught the business at her bridge game. I’d never seen a police car go by my place before I got arrested. After I got arrested, I saw three a week.”

Vera was staring at the coffee pot.

“All just for you?” Early said.

“I don’t *know*,” Randy said. He’d just finished cooking ham and cheese omelettes, and was shoveling them onto plates. “That was the worst part, you see? Here I was, dragged through the system, made over into the nightstalker and shoved to the perimeter of the herd.” He set plates full of omelette on the table. “All for conspiracy to cook ravioli. I didn’t know what was real or who to trust. I was scared.”

Randy poured a cup of coffee, added milk and sugar, and set it down in front of Vera. She wrapped her hands around it gratefully.

Randy sat down in front of his eggs. “So I said fuck it, pitched the whole business and moved to my country estate. Did I tell you the eye I have to keep out for wild cannabis? If I let a patch of it through, bang! Straight to jail. I tell you what, the last thing the DEA will believe is, “I didn’t know it was growing in my backyard.””

In the wake of Randy’s babbling, there was only the sound of the breakfast dishes.

Then Vera asked, “So, what did you guys talk about last night?” She realized some of the possible answers just as she spoke the word “night,” elongating it, and barely pronouncing the t.

“Actually, I wanted us to talk about that,” Randy began, but Vera shot him a look of such white-knuckled warning that he escaped into humor. “Oh, the things we said about you behind your back!”

Early got up suddenly to top off his coffee, his chair scraping loudly against the floor.

Randy frowned. “We’ll have to talk about this sooner or later, for Christ’s sake.”

“How would we go about it?” Early asked. He didn’t mean the talking, he meant the actual fucking. Did Randy leave the house? Or did he and Vera slip off to another room while Randy did, what? Watched Jerry Springer? It was impossible to imagine.

Would he pick up the phone when the program gave him the “If you’d like to be on the show” number?

Randy misunderstood him. “We just talk. Now’s as good a time, right?”

“Randy,” Vera began.

“Am I right?” Randy asked. Vera was silent.

“Vera,” Early said, “do you want to do this?”

Vera laughed in relief, suddenly eye to eye with the actual thing. “Look, Early; I do want a baby . . . but this . . . is . . .” She wound down to an inconclusive stop, then laughed again, her hands flowering into a shrug. She looked down at the table, in a repetition of the shyness Early had seen last night.

“This is what?” Early prodded gently.

“Awkward,” Vera said, definitively.

“That it certainly is,” Early agreed, and he was afraid he felt himself blushing.

“Oh, well, fuck it,” Vera said. She suddenly stood up, and lunged across the kitchen to grab Early’s free hand. “Come on.”

“*Hot damn,*” exclaimed Randy.

“What . . . ?” Early laughed a little, too, but he also leaned back against the tug on his wrist. They were like two knife fighters tied together.

“Come with me to the other room,” Vera said, tossing her unbraided hair to indicate the rooms beyond the kitchen. “Come on.”

Hot coffee slopping on his thumb convinced him. He allowed himself to be pulled out of the kitchen and through the house. To the master bedroom.

Vera closed the door behind them and sat on the bed. She indicated that he was supposed to sit down next to her, facing her slightly; glad to be given something to do, he did it.

“I just thought we should talk about this. Away from Randy,” Vera said. “You know, sometimes he can be a little . . .”

“Yeah, I know,” Early said. What’s he *doing*, out there?

Early’s thoughts scattered when Vera kissed him, a hard, quick kiss, like the tap of a jeweler’s hammer, her tongue like a wedge in the crack of his mouth.

She pulled away. “What do you think of all this, Early?” She asked. She stroked the side of his face affectionately.

He touched her ribs, just behind her breast, through her sweatshirt. The action thrilled him with the kind of excitement your brakes gave you by doing nothing when you stood on them, and he took his hand away.

She just sat and smiled, and waited for his answer, as if he’d brushed cracker crumbs off her knee or performed some other humdrum intimacy that could pass without remark between friends as old as they were.

“I think that I will never again think that Randy can’t surprise me anymore,” Early told her. She laughed, and looked away. He had just decided to lean forward for another kiss, but now arrested and reversed his motion. She saw him move out of the corner of her eye and turned back to accept the kiss, but he’d already withdrawn.

She looked away before he could move forward again.

“Randy and I have talked about this,” she said, “more than once. A lot more than once. I’ve timed it for this weekend. I mean, this isn’t something that we popped off at three o’clock on Friday and decided it would be fun to do.”

Early nodded. He had thought when she'd pulled him into the bedroom here that she was just going to do the deed, but now it seemed they couldn't get up to speed. There was some gear that wasn't catching.

"I want a baby. *We* want a baby, to start a family. *We*'ve been *planning* it."

Her hand was on his leg, now, above his knee, and his lay cupped against her thigh on the bed. Both contacts were inert.

"Why not have one with Randy?" he asked.

"He doesn't want to be a *father*, legally/biologically. He's got his reasons."

"And you go along with them?"

"I respect them, yeah." She looked at him. "He'd be the father. It's his right not to have a child if he doesn't want to. But I want *Randy*. This relationship isn't in thrall to my womb; I'm not going to leave Randy behind and march off to find somebody else to have babies with."

They looked at each other again. Their faces were too close together for the glance to be innocent. Vera grinned an edgy grin that asked what Early was going to do, and said that there wasn't much predicting which way she'd move when he did it.

Because somebody needed to do something, he kissed her again. She shivered as he did, and he got that bottom-out-of-his-stomach fear again.

Vera shook her head. "I don't know . . ." she laughed.

"Know about what?" Early asked.

"Oh, not about you. About this. I mean, this is . . . this is weird." She thought about it for a second. "This is not working right now. "

Early wasn't quite sure what "this" was, but he was inclined to agree that it had broken down.

Vera stood up from the bed. Early did not need to be led out as he had been led in; they did not hold hands as they left the bedroom.

They went back into the kitchen. Randy had been sitting on the front step, petting the dog, and he came in, confused and frowning, as soon as he detected their presence. "Did you guys get anything worked out in there?"

"Maybe," Vera said gayly, "maybe not. It was a private conversation."

Early was impervious to Randy's scowling as well, and found the same elation in his imperviousness as V did; they had the camaraderie of disaster survivors. He did find Randy's reaction to be in bad taste, that he'd unleash such a terrible frown because his girlfriend had declined to tryst with his best friend, no matter the trouble he'd suffered to arrange it, importing Early for the occasion.

"Don't pout, Randy," Vera told him. Randy grunted.

The day stretched out problematically before them, the usual challenge of what cheerful thing to contrive for the weekend guest exacerbated by the need to work the guest's seduction of or by the lady of the house into their amusements. Excursions were suggested, and rejected by entropy. Shows came and went on the television, and people came and went from in front of it, watching ten-minute slices of whatever was on and not changing the channel because they assumed that *someone* was watching the current program. In fact, the person who had turned on the TV had assumed that the next viewer would make liberal use of the buttons marked <>. Another show was on by the time that person had looked at the TV again, and so they assumed the next viewer *had*.

It was midafternoon when Early asked, "Where do you do your work, Randy?" None of the elements of Randy's trade were in evidence around the house.

"Come on, I'll show you," Randy said, reaching for his coat. They swept through the frozen grass of the front yard to a modern barn. Randy took out his key ring, undid the padlock holding the door shut and rolled the door aside. He reached inside and turned on the lights.

Two rows of tree lamps, one on each side of the long, narrow work room, cast gentle light on the workbench, the tools neatly racked on pegboards, and five pieces of furniture in the center of the floor. A double row of fluorescents hung, unused, from the ceiling.

"This barn, here, is what really sold the property for me." Randy spoke more quietly here than he did in the house.

"You didn't build it?"

"Hell no. Couldn't have afforded these concrete floors and lower walls. Dope growers put it up. But I might as well have purpose-built it, it's so perfect."

They walked toward the center of the shop. "You build all of these?"

"Built two, the others I'm restoring. Just finished a set of three cedar tables for a client I used to have in Erie when I lived up north; shipped them out Thursday. I've been kind of letting these slide."

"That one looks pretty old," Early remarked, gesturing at a kitchen hutch.

“Not really. It’s about thirty-five years old, but it’s Amish made, so it looks older. You see these initials, A.C.? Arnold Callman. Initials of a boy who died. I’m to leave those in.”

Early stared at the initials of the boy who was dead.

Randy pried the cap off of a can of stain. “Did you guys get anything accomplished in the bedroom this morning?”

“What bedroom?”

“In the bedroom this morning.” A rough edge of irritation crept into Randy’s voice.

Randy started brushing stain on to an oak writing desk that stood among its own sawdust shavings. His hands moved like fantasies, with a whole other state of grace. Early watched stain applied to the desk as naturally as water dripping on to a carpet; he saw the effort not in Randy’s hands, but in his forehead, deeply furrowed, a vein standing out at his temple.

A thought that had been planted in Early that morning, when Randy had come frowning in from the stoop, bloomed in him now. How could Randy love someone he treated with such brutal casualness? Randy, Early thought, had almost the same look on his face now, as some obstacle flickered past in his staining of the desk, as he’d had when he’d come in from the stoop to discover that Vera hadn’t lain down to be inseminated.

And did it make things easier if Randy loved Vera, or if he didn’t?

“What would a piece of your furniture cost me?” Early asked. Randy snorted and rolled his head.

“Don’t worry about it,” Randy told him.

“No, I mean if I wanted one.”

“I mean don’t worry about it. You want one? We can work something out. I mean, I don’t mean — hell, you know what I’m . . .” Suddenly Randy cocked his head. Then he set down brush and can, slipped the lid back on the stain. “Somebody’s here.”

The light purple Thunderbird with rims and door handles in contrasting chrome had rolled into sight by the time they walked out of the barn. “Are you expecting anybody?” Randy asked. Early was on the point of answering before he saw that Randy was being facetious.

Randy walked to put himself and Early between the gaudy car and the house. The Thunderbird rolled up to within twenty feet of them and stopped.

Early glanced at Randy, whose eyes never wavered from the car. He thought there was something grim in Randy's smile.

A thin, tightly knit man with thinning black hair got out of the passenger's side of the car and rested his forearms on the door. "Hey," he said.

"Hey," Randy said back. A burly man with a flat face, wearing a pinstriped shirt, black tie, and bristle pad of a haircut he'd died yellow, got out on the driver's side. Randy spared him a glance, a shift of his eyes. His smile burned on.

The big man and the little man looked at each other over the top of the car. "Hey," the little man assayed once more, "is Al around?"

"No," Randy said.

"How about Jake?"

"What do you guys need, some grass?" Randy asked affably.

"No, some blow," the little man was smiling, now that he'd made friends. "Is Jake — "

"No." Randy said. "Jake and Al aren't here."

"Huh." The little man said. They stared at each other.

The little man made an angry gesture with his wrist. "So who the fuck are you?"

Randy's look was so feral then that Early thought Randy was more unpredictable than the men in the outrageous car.

"The new owner. Jake and Al are doing fifteen to twenty. You want to reach 'em, look in the yellow pages under Lucasville. Now why don't you two assholes, you know, blow?" And Randy made two hard shooing motions, the kind that other people meant as cute, but with which Randy managed to convey the Platonic ideal of brutality.

The big man and the little man abruptly slammed themselves back into their Thunderbird, and backed all the way out of the long driveway with unexpected decorum. Randy and Early watched them go. "You can't ever lose your sense of humor," Randy said, waving to the departees.

Vera swept up behind them in the tall grass, startling them both. "Who was that?" She asked.

"A Russian gangster and his pipsqueak friend," said Randy.

"What'd they want?" Vera asked, surprised.

“Collecting for the United Way.”

“You know what I think we should do?” Vera asked.

“What’s that?”

“We should go into the city.”

“How did you know the big one was Russian?” Early asked more than an hour later, in a bar whose distinguishing features were silted under in darkness.

“What? Only a Russian would drive a car like that. He had the Moscow city map on his face.”

Vera was tugging on Randy’s arm. “Come on, Randy. Let’s dance,” she said, for the second time. Her body was already swaying with the music.

“Why don’t you dance with Early?” Randy asked.

Vera’s eyes moved to Early, and she gave him a warm smile that meant no.

“I think she wants to dance with you, chief,” Early said.

“I haven’t started my — ” Randy pointed at his beer.

“You’re coming with me,” she commanded.

Randy shrugged elaborately at Early. He took a gulp of his beer before going out on to the dance floor with Vera.

Early watched them from the bar. Bob Seger had finished and Alice Cooper had begun. Randy’s dancing style was nearly stationary — he stomped energetically through *Billion Dollar Babies*, putting his feet back down in almost exactly the same place from which he picked them up. Vera shook her hips back and forth, snapping her fingers. As dancers, they were talentless. But they danced in pure unselfconsciousness; Randy didn’t care what anybody in the place thought of him, except for Vera, and his security in her was entire. Vera, likewise, had no thought for anyone’s feeling but Randy’s.

They came back to the bar after Alice Cooper, and a pantomimed conversation Early recognized as meaning, “We shouldn’t leave Early alone.”

“We didn’t want you to get lonely,” Vera shouted over the music to him.

“I saw,” he nodded.

“You should dance, too,” Randy said.

“But I’m drinking.”

“No rest for the wicked!” Randy declared, as he and Vera sat back down again.

The second round was ordered when they’d finished the first. “Bad logistical planning,” Randy declared, holding up his empty bottle by way of demonstration. “We have a beer gap. Future rounds need to be ordered sooner.”

The second round arrived. “Is it okay?” Vera asked.

“I suppose it is,” Early said. “It’s the same brand as the last, but I haven’t tasted it yet — ”

She wasn’t talking about the beer. “Is it okay if we like each other a little bit? Or does it all have to be biology?”

Randy was looking off at a neon Pabst sign hung on the wall, making as if he hadn’t heard.

Early was caught without a thing to say. “Uh, I think it doesn’t all have to be biology. I think that would be okay,” he improvised. “We wouldn’t want to overshadow the conception with negative energies, or anything,” he tried to say, or did say, or at least muttered inaudibly through half of which when Vera turned to say something to Randy. The result of whatever Vera said was that she and Randy got up to dance again. A couple of minutes later, Vera caught Early’s eye from the dance floor, and summoned him over.

“We didn’t come out for you to sit all night!” Vera shouted. Early started dancing, self-consciously. He felt shut out of the higher level of dancing-being that Randy and Vera seemed to have attained together. He noticed that Randy was dancing with his eyes mostly shut, except to nod to acknowledge Early had joined them. Early nodded back, but he was pretty sure the gesture went unnoticed.

Another song started and ended, and another began, and Randy came to a stop. “Getting tired,” he yelled. “Going back for my beer,” and left the dance floor. Vera looked at Early. He smiled and shrugged.

The new song was Kiss’s *Beth*. “Wanna dance?” Vera asked Early, grinning loopily at him as she came into his arms.

“Are you drunk?” He asked her, as they began.

“Not yet. But girls are allowed to pretend,” she pulled him closer. “He’s your best friend,” she said, after a moment. “I mean, he thinks the world of you. He talks about you all the time.”

“Does he?”

“Yeah!” She nodded emphatically. “He’s always talking about you. The time you did this, the time you did that, the Pony Incident — ”

“Whoa! I think these reports of my — ”

“No, not just you. Your adventures *together* are what he talks about. He’s only twenty-eight, you know, but you’re already the good old days to him.”

He looked at her to try to read her face, but she laid her head down on his collarbone. Finally he just asked, “How is he, V?”

Into his clavicle, she said, “He’s good. Doing as well as he can, trying to make a place for himself.” She raised her head suddenly and met his eyes. “There’s not much room in the world for a man like him. There isn’t the right kind of space.”

What she’d just said catalyzed something in Early, and Randy stepped away from his background for him in a way that he never had before, abruptly rendered in three dimensions. The scaffolding that held Randy up required a different yardstick than the scaffolding that held up people who were not their own products, the frat brothers (for whom Randy had always harbored an acidic contempt), and cubicle hamsters. It made Randy like a worshiper in a strange church, where the blood was wine and the body just a wafer.

Early’s breath was taken away by the insight in Vera’s love.

Vera kissed him on the mouth. The awkwardness was receding.

“Other people are going to think something’s strange about us three,” Early quipped when she took her mouth away.

“If they can think something stranger than the truth, they should get a prize,” Vera told him.

She kissed him again, with a furtive movement of her head, as if she wasn’t sure she was allowed to. He allowed himself to enjoy it, and when she withdrew her head and they grinned at each other like seventh graders nipping out of the liquor cabinet, he saw Randy’s face watching them from where he sat at the bar. His mouth was a guitar string, and his eyes were filled with a pain that could only have been created by a love that allowed freedom.

As soon as Randy saw that Early was looking at him, his mouth bounced into a grin of *esprit de corps*, and he hail-fellow raised his beer before other dancers interrupted Early's line of sight.

He's not "okay" with this, Early realized. This hurts him like hell, but he's still doing it. He still set this up and he's riding the bomb all the way down. For Vera.

Vera's head was on his shoulder, her mouth against his collarbone. "I can do this when you're ready," Early told her.

"Okay. But let's not talk about it so damn much. And let's all do a couple of shots, first."

Randy had three shot glasses lined up on the bar when V and Early came off the floor. "Screaming Orgasms," he announced, putting one first in Early's hand, then in Vera's. Randy stood up to drink with them. "One, two, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, he who drinks the fastest gets the most, three and drink."

The Orgasms were scaldingly strong, and Early almost choked. He spluttered amen with tears running out of his eyes.

Vera launched negotiations with the bartender for three more shots.

Early heard Randy speaking to him through his choking and his tears. "We should stop acting like rivals. We should stop pretending that this isn't happening. This isn't you and Vera, or me and Vera, or you and me —" Randy swam into focus in front of him.

"We decided not to talk about it so much," Vera said abruptly to Randy. Randy looked at her with his mouth still open.

"And just do it," Early explained.

Randy made a noise that groped towards speech.

"Too much noise can fuck this up," Vera declared. She put new shots into Early and Randy's hands. "Drink this one quick, or the first one will have too much of a head start." Vera threw hers back. Early drank his more slowly. Randy decided he had nothing more to say and tossed his down.

"No no no no no," Vera shook her head, her face flushed and sweaty. "I should drive."

"How many drinks have you had?" Early asked. She named a figure that was wildly inaccurate.

It was decided that Randy should drive. He was drunk, but consensus held him to be the steadiest, in this instance and characteristically. Early would sit in an advisory capacity.

“Keep both hands on the wheel. Eyes front. England expects every man to do his duty. *Blood on the Highway*, Randy! Ninety-three percent of all drunk driving accidents are horribly, horribly fatal. Seventy-two percent of all statistics are worthless. Act normal! They can *smell your fear!*”

Thus was Randy advised. He drove with stone-faced seriousness, bug-eyed. The speedometer hovered at fifty all the way home.

When they arrived alive, Randy swaggered into the house with a nonchalance so finely-wrought it qualified as baroque. He clicked on the stereo and poured three drinks. Vera shoved Early up against the kitchen sink, put her tongue in his mouth and her hands in the hair on the back of his head.

Randy was holding out the tumblers of Wild Turkey and water when they let go of each other. “Ladies and gentlemen, may I suggest a retreat to the bedroom?”

“But how will you entertain yourself?” Early asked with the same mock courtesy. He took a glass from Randy.

Vera accepted a tumbler and took a gulp. “You’re right,” she declared. “It’s time.”

In the bedroom Vera’s hand found Early’s cock with startling ease. “Don’t worry,” Vera whispered, “this is very easy. Anybody can do it. Tab A, and slot B.” She pressed her open mouth sloppily against his. He tasted Wild Turkey and water as his cock stiffened in her firm, warm grip. He grabbed her and pressed her body against his, and with a dashing swell of bravado ran his hands up under her shirt, shoved her bra up around her neck and took her tits in his hands.

She was right about it being easy. His cock stood to the occasion. She stood back and watched him take off his sweater and t-shirt in the blue half light of the bedroom — then he took off hers. Her nipples quivered erect in the chilly air. She pushed his jeans down off his hips and his hard-on bobbed free. She stepped out of her stretch pants. Her pubic hair was a chiaroscuro shadow against her pale pubis.

She pulled him down on top of her on the bed and he fell into her warm arms, his cock poking between them, finding her firm and slippery slit.

“You’re inside me,” she breathed, when he was, and her breathing caught on the last word. He debated for a minute about whether or not it was right for him to try to give her an orgasm, but he quickly realized that he didn’t know how to make love to a woman without trying to make her come, and while he was wrestling with the question his own orgasm surprised him. Growling into Vera’s ear, he spurted inside her.

They both laughed gently as he rested on top of her and she stroked his back. His mind wandered on the endorphin tide. He imagined how his own back would look if he could look at it with a thermograph. It would be pale blue in the chilly bedroom, and her hands would leave yellow streaks of warmth where they rubbed him.

In the quiet, Early listened for Randy, for a clue that Randy had heard him orgasm, or their laughter. But the house was silent, the night still.

He rolled off her and reached for her cunt, but she caught his wrist. “Don’t worry. We’ll do it again, to make sure it takes,” she murmured.

They wrapped the comforter around themselves and lay side by side for warmth. They talked a little about the old days; Vera asked Early about stories she had not seen, and Early confirmed them. Early reminded Vera of some stories she had starred in, and Vera blushed.

Looking at her in the pale blue light that came in from the night outside the window, brushing against her firm flesh for the warmth of it, Early felt for a minute an emotional intimacy and familiarity with Vera that he’d never permitted himself before, because she had always been Randy’s girlfriend. He felt a constriction of the coils of regret for the standoffishness he’d always put between them for reasons of manly honor, when he should have been being a better friend to her.

He thought of his sperm on its secret mission inside of her, sailing beyond the baths of all the western stars to create a life by morning. The thought made him hard again, and into the silence that had reigned as he lay thinking Vera smiled, and straddled him, and said, “Look what I found. What have we got here?”

“More work to do before the sun comes up,” Early moaned.

The bones of her pelvis dug into him a little uncomfortably as she ground down on him from above. The pain distracted him enough that, while his erection maintained and he enjoyed the pleasure of her body, he couldn’t come. Vera undid the braid in her hair, laughing gently, saying, “I think we’re casual enough for me to let my hair down, don’t you think?” The silk curtain of her hair tickled Early’s nose and stifled his breathing when Vera leaned forward, and when she came, which she did twice, Early was nearly suffocated; she lay down on his chest, her hair piling around his mouth and nose, and she wrapped her arms around his neck and chest, and squeezed him as she shuddered. Early wondered if this kind of fucking, which struck him as something like the death struggles of enemy sentries on a dark perimeter, was the kind of fucking that strongly excited Randy. Before he could stop himself he imagined himself as Randy, Randy’s cock swelling powerfully in response to Vera’s probing pubic bone. Over and over again, three or four times a week.

He shoved Vera up off him, his own cock slapping free against his belly. “What? What?” She asked. He shook his head and piled pillows against the headboard behind him, then propped himself up against them.

He reached for her and she scooted forward on her knees. Moonlight glittered for a second in her wet pubic hair. Early crossed his legs Indian-fashion and she sat in his lap, allowing his cock freer play in the long tunnel of her sex, and he came very quickly that way.

Afterwards the nesting instinct took over. The comforter was pulled up to his chest and her ear, and they fell asleep.

Early lay on his back in a semi-dream, unsure of what was real and pleasantly uninvolved in it. He had a dream about sunrise, but he was pretty sure it was just a dream. He thought he heard a door slam, but he thought that was a dream, too. He felt the bed creak. He saw a clear image of Vera’s nude back and her haunches as she climbed out of the bed. He thought that the creaking of the bed was real. He thought maybe he imagined in his dream the vision of her back, because he had seen her with her hair braided in the vision.

The morning sun felt very real, shining on his closed eyelids. He opened them a crack, and saw the sun blazing in through the bedroom’s easterly window. In groggy irritation he thought, *That’s a design flaw, easterly windows in a bedroom.*

He was lying on his side. He looked over his shoulder to see if Vera was there, still lying where she had fallen asleep, and she wasn’t. Randy was lying there instead. His head was propped against the headboard. His golden blond hair was undone, flowing down across his collarbones in disorderly cascades. There was more golden blond hair on his flat and muscular stomach, and that was how Early discovered Vera. Early had seen the hair on Randy’s stomach many times before, but this time when his eye followed it down he was shocked to discover that Randy was completely naked. And the hair that started on his stomach suddenly flourished below the waistline into a startling profusion of golden blond curls that nested a pale, lean cock on which Vera was meditatively sucking as she knelt between Randy’s legs. Her mouth bobbed up and down on Randy’s shaft in a steady rhythm. Her eyes were shut.

One of Randy’s hands was behind his head. The other toyed with the back of Vera’s neck. And only after taking in all these details did Early realize that Randy was looking right at him, and he was grinning a grin so satyric that it made Early shiver.

Pretty sure that he didn’t want to watch that spectacle, Early lay back down in his original position. He shut his eyes tightly against the sun and dozed off again.

“ . . . if you want to have some breakfast.” The words were spoken directly into his ear.

He seemed to be involved in a conversation the beginning of which he didn’t remember. “What if I want to have some breakfast?”

The voice in his ear said, "You have to get up."

He would also have to get up if he didn't want to wet the bed.

In the hall on the way to the bathroom, he could hear and smell Randy frying sausages and brewing coffee. He went back into the bedroom to retrieve the rest of his clothes. Vera was sitting cross-legged on the bed in a white flannel nightgown. His eyes wandered in the dark space between her knees. He wondered if she was wearing panties.

"How long before breakfast is ready?" Early asked.

"Probably ten or fifteen minutes. I need something to keep me warm until the coffee is ready," she held out her arms, smiling invitingly, her face flushing. Back on her penetration agenda, but she seemed even more keen for it than she had last night. Going down on Randy had excited her, Early decided as she hotly wrapped her legs around him. She was wearing panties, as it turned out, but pushed them aside.

Then they joined Randy for a weirdly cheerful breakfast of biscuits and gravy in a kitchen that smelled sharply of espresso and shone with cold sunshine. Randy had drunk two cups of espresso while they had been in the bedroom, and he talked excitedly about things in the future. He wanted to build himself an entertainment center. He wanted to build an addition to the house. Vera ate like a wolf.

Early started when he looked up at the wall clock and saw that it read 1:30 in the afternoon. "Is that clock right?" he looked at his wrist, but he couldn't read the time in a pale stripe of skin.

Randy looked over his shoulder at the kitchen clock. "*Tempus fugit*," he shrugged carelessly.

Early had to go.

The weather had changed, and it was a raw forty degrees that felt like rain coming that Early stood in to load his bags into his car. Vera wore a turtleneck sweater, flannel shirt and house slippers. "Did you get everything?"

Early nodded, "Some of it was pretty widely scattered, but I think so."

Randy bounded out of the house, and the dog followed. "Hang on, boss, you forgot something." He held out Early's tie.

"Thanks," Early accepted it, and turned it over in his hands. "It's been fun. We'll have to – stay in touch." He smiled.

"We'll let you know, you know, what happens," Vera stooped to pet the dog.

"Otherwise you'll have to come back down next month," joked Randy while Early asked simultaneously, "what's the dog's name?"

"Templar," Randy and Vera both said, but out of sinc just enough that Early didn't understand them. "Templar," Randy had to repeat.

Early hugged them both one at a time. "Remind me about getting you some furniture!" Randy shouted as Early started up his engine. Templar chased the Chevy halfway down the long driveway, barking loudly. Early looked at Vera and Randy in his rearview mirror as they stood together, framing the house between and behind them, watching him drive away. They had nicely symmetrical stances, their outside legs straight, their inside legs each out at an angle, their hands in their back pockets. They didn't seem to speak as they watched Early head for the road. Early watched them there until the curve of the driveway and the screening trees made them invisible. His mind was occupied all the way to Akron, imagining what happened between them after the Monte's taillights had disappeared around the trees.