

## I DIED, SIR, IN FLAME, SIR

By Richard Bowes

The response we have had to Richard Bowes' Kevin Grierson stories has been extremely positive. The first, "On Death and the Deuce," (April, 1992) has been sold to two best-of collections. The second, "The Beggar at the Bridge," (December, 1993) and the third, "The Shadow and the Gunman" (February, 1994) have garnered a lot of word of mouth. "I Died, Sir, In Flame, Sir" is the fourth. We have another Grierson story in inventory.

All of the Kevin Grierson tales happen at a different point in Kevin's life and hence stand alone. Rick is combining them all into a novel, *Minions of the Moon*, which promises to be as good as or better than the stories that inspired it.

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WEARING A WONDERFUL TURquoise blouse, Sarah Bryce Callendar opened the door of her guest room. Inside was a big bed with a soft comforter. A table and chest of drawers were set between two ten-foot-tall windows. "There's space for you here, Kevin. I'd like you to stay." Her auburn hair was long and worn loose.

The offer was not a surprise. Mutual friends had told me what to expect when they put the two of us back in touch. A few years before, Sarah and I had lived together to really bad effect. Clearly, this time, we would not be lovers. My bedroom was all the way across the loft from hers. Still, her kindness almost overwhelmed me. "Thanks for being able to forgive," I managed to tell her.

"When I heard you had cleaned up and that you needed a place, I knew you were the one I wanted here. How soon can you move in?"

With just a moment's chagrin at being thirty-plus and still scrounging for somewhere to live, I replied, "Tonight."

Sarah took away the sting by saying, "Great," and making it a business matter. "I understand you have to hold two jobs to get by. I'd like you to quit the weekend one. Room and board will be free. Since I can't be here with Scotty Saturday and Sunday during the day, I'd especially like you to be around then. You heard why?"

"Something about your in-laws."

"They've made noises about wanting custody of their only grandchild."

Her son was over at a friend's. His room was next to mine, its door open. I looked in on a nine-year-old's lair and said, "What about Scott? I was pretty rough on him."

“He still asks about you, Kevin.” Out in the main living area, a phone rang and Sarah went to answer it.

I looked around Scott’s room. A green plastic brontosaurus with bright red eyes was new to me. The diesel engine and battered cars, the handful of beaten up metal grenadiers, I recalled from my last stay. They were a legacy of Scott Callendar Senior. The tall chest in the corner was Sarah’s, come down to her from an ancestor who had been a ship’s captain. In gold paint on its dark front, chipped and scratched Chinese men in robes and wide hats poked at a porcupine with long sticks.

On the chair next to the bed were a couple of books open face down. One, a collection of rhymes called A Garland Knot for Children, seemed familiar. Picking it up, I saw inscriptions on the title page indicating that it had been in the Callendar family for generations. The Garland contained favorites like “Humpty Dumpty” and “Mary Had a Little Lamb” along with items new to me such as “There Was a Lady Loved a Swine.”

The original artwork was wood cuts. But the book had gotten annotated over the years with crayon drawings and faded pencil scribbles of children now old or dead. My attention was caught by a brand new thumb-sized illustration in red, black, and yellow. I recognized Scott Junior’s work. The poem on that page went:

I CAME, SIR, FOR FAME, SIR,  
THE SPOILS OF YOUR FAIR TOWN,  
AND 'T WAS STRANGE TO SEE, SIR,  
THE WHOLE WORLD WAS WATCHING ME.  
I DIED, SIR, IN FLAME, SIR.  
THE OLD DEVIL TOOK ME DOWN.  
IF YOU DOUBT 'T IS TRUE, SIR,  
YOU WON'T WHEN HE COMES FOR YOU.

At first, I thought he had drawn a match head. It took me a moment to realize it was a fiery motorcycle and rider. When Scott was two, his father had died on a flaming bike. Once, roaring drunk, I had described the accident to the kid. Obviously he had remembered.

The drawing evoked a chain of memories I would have preferred not to face. But I couldn’t do that. Part of staying sober involved my performing a kind of balancing act. I had to remember the past clearly but not let it control the present. Scott as a kid had no control over his present or his past. I turned away from his room resolved to repair what I had done.

In the rolling main area of her loft, the couches were draped with quilts in Southwestern motifs, samples for Sarah’s store. She told me, “I’m advised not to let Scott go visit for fear of not getting him back. It’s hard to make him understand

why he can't see his only grandparents. And even though I think they're mighty creepy, I don't like him to grow up hating them.

"Recently, I noticed a black van parked across the street and a guy in it just watching. A couple of times I spotted another man out back staring at this place. I feel like I'm under observation."

The back windows looked out on a deserted Soho panorama of faded bricks and old wooden water towers. The roof behind was three floors down and separated from us by an alley. "Let's see what happens," I said, trying to sound wise and tough.

As she let me out, Sarah asked, "Remember Ian? You hated him, right? Well, he got real mean before he went back to England. Frankie you never met. Looked like a million bucks, had a million bucks, said he loved kids. After two months he was doubled over with back pain and screaming at us. I decided to take a long breath and think things over." I thought she looked a little haunted as she told me that.

Down on the cobblestone street, I looked for the black van she had mentioned. In the September twilight, artists in work clothes smoked dope on a loading platform, a cluster of Spanish women headed home from the Triboro Pinking Shears Company.

When Sarah and her three-year-old son had settled into an empty factory floor, she had been a pioneer. By the mid-seventies, Manhattan south of Houston Street had started to boom, the World Trade Center twin towers were an eye-catching wonderment on the downtown skyline. But Fanelli's Bar and the shops still closed in the evening, Despite grow lamps in loft windows, whole blocks of Soho could seem empty after dark.

Riding the IRT uptown, I thought about Sarah's taste for guys who were flying off the beam, guys like her husband and me. Outside of that failing she was very successful. At twenty-three she had a child, lots of bills, and some connections among the Russian ladies who were quietly going blind embroidering blouses.

A couple of years later she had Callendar Days, a little store that got mentioned in the Times and New York Magazine. One Saturday afternoon when we two lived together, I staggered in there with a bloody nose. I had been supposed to take Scott to the zoo. But gin and rum and destiny played funny tricks. "I have people that I'm trying to wait on," Sarah said and managed very expertly to maneuver me into the storeroom in the rear of the shop.

At a little desk in the corner Scott sat doodling with magic markers. "Your mother is pissed off at me," I remarked, amazed that she couldn't accept my simple gift of myself.

“That’s because you’re stoned,” he said like an adult explaining something to a child.

I begged to differ. “She’s afraid that everybody she gets involved with is going to kill themselves. Just like your father did.” Scott looked at me wide-eyed. His father’s death was an unspoken event in the household. Since this seemed like the perfect moment, I asked, “You know what happened to your old man?”

He shook his head and I told him, “One winter night, he dropped five thousand mc’s of untested California acid and took a motorcycle ride on Roosevelt Drive. He hit an ice patch and plowed into a bridge support. The gas tank blew up and he went over the side in a ball of flame. The bike was borrowed and the first thing your mother had to do was repay the owner.”

Scott ran past me with his head down so that I couldn’t see his face. On the desk was the Garland Knot, which I hadn’t noticed before. As I went to pick it up, Sarah came into the storeroom and said, “I can’t stand to see you this way, Kevin.” I told her a few things about herself. The next day, I moved out of the loft and went right down the tubes.

That happened very fast. My return trip was much slower. A man named Leo Dunn helped. No one can pull you out of the gutter. But when I finally decided I wanted to crawl out, he showed me how. His number was the lucky charm in my wallet. The evening of my reunion with Sarah, I called from a pay phone and told him what had happened. “That sounds like wonderful luck, my friend,” he said.

That was my thought also. I returned to the Abigail Adams Hotel at Thirty-Third and Lexington and packed my bags. As I did, some guy upstairs screamed like his teeth were being pulled. Then I walked out through a lobby full of hookers and took a cab downtown.

MY FIRST Saturday back in the loft was September bright. The TV was on in Scott’s room when I made my way to the kitchen. The two of us hadn’t spoken much since my return. Sarah went out the front door telling me, “This may be a late day.”

The kitchen contained potentially dangerous things, sharp knives, a small box of matches. None of them could do harm if they were left alone. While the tea brewed, my eyes were drawn to the cabinet where she kept liquor.

My last time in residence it had been a shrine for display of my totemic symbol, the empty booze bottle. Since then it had been restocked with name brands: Johnny Walker Red, Bombay Gin, Napoleon brandy, a few well chosen wines.

The night I showed up again Sarah had asked me if I wanted her to clear it

out. I shook my head. “Booze will always be there,” Mr. Dunn once told me. “Get used to it. They won’t reinstitute the Volstead Act just for you and me.”

As I thought about that, Scott came out of his room and went to the refrigerator without saying anything. Pushing the dark hair from his eyes, he pulled out a giant Coke bottle, spun on one sneaker heel, hooked a mug off the shelf, and poured in one continuous action. As I sat wondering how to begin to untangle things, he saw me watching him. “Kevin?”

“Yeah?”

“Mom says you’re not drinking and stuff.”

“That’s right.”

“I’m glad.” Very solemnly, he came over to me and shook my hand.

“Me too,” I said, full of wonder at kids’ wisdom. “Listen, Scott, I’m sorry for a lot of things I may have said. About that last time in particular.”

I was prepared to go on. But Scott nodded and said, “Okay,” like the subject was closed and we were friends again.

That Saturday we had two adventures. The first began in Scott’s room shortly after our handshake. He held up a drawing of an Indian medicine man wearing a buffalo mask. The eyes behind the holes looked mean. “This is a Sioux,” he said. “I’m doing it for school You like him, huh?”

“It’s great. Especially the eyes.” I couldn’t find A Garland Knot for Children and wasn’t quite ready to ask. Suddenly, Scott turned toward the window and shouted. “There’s the guy Morn talks about!”

Looking out, I saw a man with wild gray hair staring up avidly, eyes hidden behind thick glasses. His wrinkled face reminded me of an old sponge. I recognized a chance for an easy triumph. “That’s TJ,” I said. “Let’s go talk to him.”

Without hesitation, Scott ran for his jacket. As we walked around the block, I remembered TJ. He had been a drinking companion of Jackson Pollock, friend of De Kooning. A couple of falls on the head had left him permanently dazed, a very abstract expressionist. “The guy’s an old time artist,” I told Scott.

On Greene Street directly behind Sarah’s place was a one-story converted garage. From my previous stay in the neighborhood, I knew that a bored old lady sculptor gave life drawing classes there on the weekends. She and TJ were a longtime item.

Everything worked perfectly. Scott and I arrived at the break. Students stood outside smoking, discussing art. Indoors, a young lady in a robe did flexing exercises to get her circulation back. I told the teacher, "Listen, we live on the next block. There's a problem at the back of our building and we'd like to get up on your roof, take a look."

She shrugged. We went up a flight of iron stairs, came out on the roof behind TJ. He was still looking up. Following his gaze, I saw what at first seemed like a stain on the wall next to Scott's and my windows.

It took me a moment to decipher it. Pointing, I told Scott, "That's an old advertising mural of some kind. The words are worn away. All that's left of the ad is color, splotches of red and dying yellow, like a faded canvas."

The artist turned around looking confused, a little embarrassed. "Good morning, TJ," I said. "Looking at the mural?"

"I was." He started walking away. "Fucking tourists," he added in a toothless Loony Tunes delivery. I felt bad intruding on him that way. But Scott seemed fascinated. When we went back downstairs, the class had started again. He watched the nude model out of the corner of his eye.

Outside, Scott told me, "TJ is okay. Frankie always said he was going to find the guy, scare him away. But Frankie always got sick, had a bad back. He was an asshole."

I had never met Frankie, but given what I knew of Sarah's tastes that seemed not unlikely. We went home and had lunch: peanut butter and jelly sandwiches all around. "We can tell your mother she doesn't have to worry about that." I felt like I was earning my keep.

Scott nodded, one man of the world to another, then asked out of nowhere, "Do you remember the Islands Game?"

"I'm the one who showed it to you." The kid amazed me. I had wondered how to bring up certain things that lay in Scott's past. The Islands Game was the perfect way. "Let's look at your toys. Got anything new?"

His room, with its wide expanse of floor, the light flooding in the windows, was an ideal playing area. Since I'd been gone, Scott had acquired a castle, a fine wooden structure with a drawbridge and some stalwart plastic knights to guard it. One knight appeared slightly fused like he might have been the victim of an experiment with fire.

Also present were a garage, a train station, what looked like the cabin of an antique Noah's ark, toy trees, a train and tracks and blocks. "Plenty of blocks," I

said.

“Let’s make three islands,” Scott suggested. “And a boat.”

The game was evocative. As we set to work, I thought of Uncle Jamey teaching me the game when I was about ten. A long and dapper man, his hair the color of gray sand, he was my mother’s youngest uncle, over from Dublin for a family funeral. Stepping into my room, he saw me sitting alone among my possessions and said, “Ah, would you look at this!” Picking up a cannon, he asked, “Does it fire, now?” We talked for quite a while about my toys.

As mysterious to me as the death of the relative I hardly knew was the hostile chill in my parents’ house. A few days later when my mother had to be away, Uncle Jamey came back and spent an afternoon playing on the floor with me. I remember his breath flavored with whiskey and cigarettes as he said, “Those you have in your hand are Highlanders. Fierce fighters but unwitting tools of English Imperialism. Where shall we put them?”

“In the fort,” I answered. “You can be their leader if you want.”

“Thanks kindly. And where do we put the fort?”

“On this island. They’re hiding there because of the Indians and animals.”

“The garrison and I will hold out against the half-naked savages and wild lions,” said Uncle Jamey, who wrote for the newspapers back in Ireland. “And what will you be doing?”

“I’m this guy,” I said, producing a cowboy on a rearing horse. “He’s gonna lead the cavalry to rescue you. But he doesn’t know where you are. He starts way over on this other island. He doesn’t know you’re in danger.”

Mr. Dunn, who had taught me that I could never forget the past, also said that some memories were like land mines to be defused with great care. Kids are aware of everything and nothing. At ten, I knew that my mother and stepfather didn’t get along and that it was getting worse and worse. But, as kids do, I accepted that as normal.

By the time of the funeral, my stepfather was never around, my mother seemed very angry. I had questions about what was happening and, in Jamey, an adult who could have answered them. But I couldn’t find the words or the way to ask. While the two of them wound up their marriage, I was slaying lions, defeating Indians, rescuing Grand-Uncle Jamey.

As Scott and I built islands out of blocks, placed the buildings and trees on them, made a ship out of a shoe box, I remembered Jamey saying, “No one wins or

loses the Islands Game.”

“What about the castle?” I asked.

“Ian made that the castle of the evil prince,” Scott said.

Jealousy rose in me. “He knew the game?”

“I showed it to him. He had to be the good knight and win.” He gestured toward the slightly melted figure. “He was an asshole.”

Ian had been my immediate successor and I couldn’t have agreed more.

“Did you show Frankie the game too?”

“One time. He wanted to be the American soldier and shoot everybody; then he hurt his back and couldn’t play.” Scott laid out the figures: the metal English guardsmen, one or two of whom had misplaced their heads, the knights, a dozen or so plastic Indians, several West Point Cadets, an outsize G.I. missing his rifle.

We even had civilians: a worn, ancient Mr. and Mrs. Noah, a little silver ballerina, Mickey Mouse dressed as a Keystone Cop, an armless china shepherdess, a small pair of pipe cleaner dolls in Mexican gear. Animals also appeared, a wooden bear and tiger left over from the Flood, assorted plastic cows and pigs, a camel from a nativity scene.

“The G.I. is on this island with the tiger,” I said. “He doesn’t know the war is over.” As I picked the figure up, I noticed a welt along its back.

Scott produced a chicken which laid white marble eggs and was bigger than a man mounted on a horse. “Maybe that can be the Roc. Its eggs are magic,” I suggested.

“It lives in the castle on the big island,” Scott added. He put the grenadiers in a boat. “These belonged to my father. This one is me.” He held up the officer. “I heard the legend. I’m sailing the boat looking for it.”

“I’m the captain of the ship.” I put a cadet on the bridge. “Whoever gets a Roc’s egg can ask any question he wants and the Roc will answer.” That was my own contribution to the game: the chance to ask a question.

Half the afternoon went in setting up the islands. The rest we spent moving the boat a couple of feet each turn, deciding where to land and what happened then. Scott as the Grenadier officer was brave yet merciful. I tagged along uttering an occasional “Avast there,” in my capacity as the ship’s captain. Between us, we played everyone else from the camel to Mrs. Noah.



From a position flat on the floor, I discovered again that furniture could be mountains, the ceiling sky. Holding a railroad engine in one hand, a cow in the other, I felt at once mouse and monster: in other words, nine years old. As the sun faded, Scott pushed the guardsmen and the Indians who had become their friends past the Ark cabin where the ballerina stood. "Because they helped her capture the bear," I explained, "the silver goddess tells them about a secret entrance to the castle."

With amazing ease Scott polished off the knights who were doing duty as the slave robots of the Roc. I sensed his great urgency. The final confrontation was anticlimactic. The grenadiers burst into the throne room, Scott pressed the Roc's head and grabbed the egg.

"I get to ask it a question," he said, "and it has to answer correctly."

"Okay."

Without even taking a deep breath, he asked, "Are Kevin and Mom going to start making it again?"

Instead of pretending to be the Roc, I answered him simply. "No chance at all. She's letting me stay here for old times' sake."

Scott nodded seriously.

Then I moved the cadet/naval captain up to the throne, pressed the chicken's head, and picked up the white glass egg. This seemed the right moment to ask, "What has become of the sacred lost book A Garland Knot for Children?"

Scott was startled. He shrugged and gave me a wide-eyed baffled look like I had asked the unknowable. "Hey," I said, "the mystical and holy chicken has to answer."

Scott was quick. He spoke into cupped hands for an echoing, oracle effect. "It's gone to the land of dust bunnies and lost socks." All I could do was laugh. Afterwards I looked again under his bed and behind the radiator.

When Sarah returned, Scott leaped up, saying, "Me and Kevin talked to that guy on the roof out back. He's an old artist. He's cool."

Next I decided to see about the Van Man. My research job paid badly but was loosely structured. One morning at eight-thirty I sat at a front window and watched Scott get picked up for school. No van was in sight. A bit after ten, just as Sarah left to open her store, the black van pulled up across the street.

Van Man was a beefy, sullen guy in his thirties. He sat at the wheel staring as

Sarah walked up to Houston Street. It was hard to blame him. Living on the downside, I had almost forgotten that people could move with her grace. Van Man watched other ladies too. After a while, he got out, loaded boxes from the back of the van onto a hand truck and headed down the block.

Very casually, I followed him over to De Luca's on Prince Street. These days, Dean and De Luca's is a huge upscale emporium on Broadway that sells coffee for a dollar a bean. Then, De Luca's was a tiny shop offering the new residents of Soho good breads, fine cheese, and countermen who made sandwiches while singing belle canto in the manner of Maria Callas.

From them I found out about the Van Man. His name was Jay Imanella and he delivered farmer's cheese his mother made. "Delivery days are the only time he gets away from her," said a tall, bearded diva. "We call him The Merry Farmer because he isn't. Usually we're his last stop. If you're really anxious to cruise him, he's probably down the street tying one on."

"Down the street" meant Fanelli's with its antique frosted windows and array of boxing photos. Jay Imanella sat at the polished bar amidst light sculptors and office supply salesmen. He drank in a joyless, determined way as I sipped club soda in a comer. Then he went back to sit in his truck and watched women go by.

All this I saved until its proper time. One night I came back late from visiting Dunn and found Sarah sitting on a huge couch, her legs drawn up under a quilt, looking worried. She said, "The creep in the van was out front this morning when I left for the shop. He was still there when Scott came back from school."

"You think it's your in-laws?" I asked, knowing it wasn't but curious about the Callendars.

"When they threatened to sue for guardianship, my lawyer warned they might put the place under surveillance. To find something to use against me. She suggested they might try a snatch."

Sarah sighed. "I joke about it, but I really think my mother-in-law is a witch. I don't want Scott to grow up hating his father's family. But they are so nasty and so strange. I can understand what my husband was trying to escape."

Sarah hardly ever talked about him directly. "We were all pretty rebellious at that point," I said.

"Every time he talked to them on the phone, he'd get angry, then he'd get stoned. And you remember how he got then, Kevin. Especially just before the end."

I recalled Scott Senior, dark-haired, mad-eyed, storming out into a fiery death in the rain. I remembered many things. But all I said was, "Don't worry about Van

Man.”

My mentor Mr. Dunn would have said that what I planned was sleazy and more than a little cruel to a fellow drunk. So I never told him about it.

A couple of days later I let Van Man stay in Fanelli’s until he was sure to have a load aboard. Then I called the bar and asked for Jay Imanella. The poor, befuddled slob came to the phone. “Imanells,” I told him in a dead, phlegm-choked voice, “I saw you looking at my wife. You know which one she is.” Then I uttered the most terrible threat he could imagine. Two minutes later the van sped away.

After a couple of weeks, Sarah asked, “Is Van Man gone for good?” and I just smiled enigmatically.

Maybe my sobriety was a new chance at childhood, or I was trying out what it would be like to have a kid. But in lots of ways that autumn, I was a perfect companion for a nine-year-old. I felt closer to Scott than I ever had to most people. A couple of times we played touch football with some of his friends. One Sunday he had to go to a tenth birthday party for a beautiful little Asian girl whom he hated.

I began reading to him: *Treasure Island*, *Doctor Dolittle and the Secret Lake*, *The Thurber Carnival*, *Grimms’ Tales*, *Nine Princes in Amber*. He liked most of them. I loved them all.

His hand-illustrated *A Garland Knot for Children* was nowhere to be found. I searched Fourth Avenue used bookstores for another copy. No one had ever heard of it.

On my way downtown from Mr. Dunn’s one evening, I stopped at F.A.O. Schwartz and bought a fine plastic African elephant with an arched trunk and flared tusks. Scott was delighted when I placed the elephant at the center of the labyrinth we constructed in our next Islands Game. It pleased me too, but I guess it was a kind of bait.

Once, I awoke with the fading memory of a dream. In it, I stood in the street outside on a gray, overcast dawn. Looking downtown, I saw, instead of the World Trade Towers, the jean-clad legs of a gigantic child, disappearing up into the morning fog. Nothing in the neighborhood stirred. The only sound was a motorcycle blocks away and approaching fast.

A Saturday or two later, we built a mountain topped by a ramshackle pagoda. Looking up from the floor I saw the Chinese men on the chest tormenting the porcupine and said, “Those are the wise men of the mountain. Whoever makes it to the top of the pagoda can ask them a question.”

When we took out the toys, I discovered that the elephant listed to the side.

One of its legs was partially melted. Scott too looked surprised by this. I said nothing. In our game that day, I made sure that after some adventures and much imaginary mayhem, both Scott and I got to ask questions.

Scott asked first. He seemed a little anxious. "Can I get a skateboard for my birthday?"

In an outrageous accent, I replied, "This question is for wisdom greater even than that of the all-knowing porcupine pokers. You must ask Sarah, the mighty mother."

For my question, I held up the elephant and asked, "How did this get burned?"

Scott started to cup his hands. He thought better of it. Very hesitantly he asked, "You know that book you asked about?"

"The Garland Knot."

"You saw the drawing I made?"

"The flaming cycle."

"That's what did it." He shrugged like I could believe him or not as I wanted.

I started to ask him more questions, but he just stared at the elephant not with shame or regret but with a kind of savage awe.

When I looked, the matches in the kitchen were undisturbed. I found no others in the loft. The matter lay between us as a barrier all week. Next Saturday we sat watching TV. Scott beside me on the couch slouched down so his sneakers could reach the coffee table I rested my legs on. Out of nowhere, he asked, "Kevin? Remember what you said about my father?"

Flinching, I replied, "Whatever I may tell you, I'll never say that a lot of the time I don't act like an asshole."

"What you said was true. I asked about it. He's cool. If you hadn't said that, I would never have asked anyone. Mom wouldn't say much. But Grandma Callendar showed me a lot.

"She taught me where to draw the picture of him. That book was both of theirs. It's not around most of the time, only when Dad thinks there's going to be trouble. And the two of us can tell each other stuff. Like he was mad you were here but I told him you're cool."

I could think of nothing to say. In a couple of weeks, Scott was going to be ten years old, approaching the height of childhood, a king among kids. I had loved his mother before she met her husband. And at first I had loved the father for his style, all speed and power and appetite. Later I saw it translate into brutality.

Scott breathed a sigh, as if relieved that the message was delivered. Did I detect some trepidation? A trace of the outlaw's kid who craves his father even as he fears him? Before I could consider that, Scott jumped up and said, "Let's go and I'll show you the skateboard that I want."

Even though Halloween was past and everyone was thinking of family and Thanksgiving, that afternoon was lingering October bright. Sarah was going to a dinner party after work and asked me to stay till she got back. "No later than twelve."

I took that to mean one. Maybe two. Plenty of time for me to seek my fortune over on West Street. Scott was long in bed when something called Saturday Night Live came on. Amazingly, it seemed to be all drug jokes. An old TV movie followed that. Then I awoke to the sound of a key in the door. "Kev, I'm sorry," were her first words. "I just could not get away." Something had not worked out for her that evening.

"It's fine." That came out sounding a lot sadder than I had intended.

She crossed the living room to where I sat and gave me a cognac flavored kiss. It was the first time we had kissed since before I'd moved away. "Scott's asleep?" she asked. I nodded. "I'm a lousy mother."

"You're just a party animal. He showed me the skateboard he wants for his birthday," I told her.

"What do you think?" Her tone said she saw it as a step on the road to the flaming motorcycle.

"It'll be okay. In fact I was thinking of getting one also."

Sarah stood before me. She reached down and undid a button on my shirt. I said nothing. This was unanticipated. But part of me had hoped for it all along.

Sarah undressed me for a while before I stood and kissed her. In heels she was taller than I was barefoot. The taste of booze remained in her mouth. "Closest I can come to a nightcap," I said and started to undress her. City light shone through the windows and it was chill in the loft as we went to her room.

Our being together was a surprise to both of us. My recent partners were anonymous pick-ups. That night with Sarah was wonderfully familiar but upside

down. For the first time, I was sober and she was stoned, a creature of the subconscious. She swam in my arms, brushed me like silk, bit me.

Sometime later, she asked, “Key, you were so smug about it. How did you get rid of Van Man?”

“Simple. I just went downstairs and tipped his little truck over.” She pinched me. “You really want to know? Promise you won’t think less of me as a man?” She raised her hand like a gift scout.

“I asked around about him. Then I called him up.” Here I put on the voice full of phlegm and danger. “Imanella? I see what you’re doing. I know where you live. I’m gonna tell your mother you’re getting drunk and looking at my wife.” Even as Sarah laughed, I knew telling her was a dumb thing to do. A good magician doesn’t reveal his tricks. A foolish one thinks the audience will love him anyway.

Abruptly, Sarah stopped laughing and asked, “Van Man had nothing to do with my in-laws?”

“Not so far as I can tell.”

“Guilt projection. My damn anxiety leaking out. I did analysts, you know. All kinds. Because of my recurring feeling that I didn’t do enough to help my husband before that night. Rationally I know there was no stopping him. I was afraid of him just before he died. He was demonic. It’s awful to say, but I’m happy Scott can’t remember his father.”

That was the moment for me to tell her about A Garland Knot for Children and the singed toys. But just then, from somewhere uptown, louder than a backfire, came a single bang, an explosion in the night.

I started and Sarah responded by sighing and shifting away from me. A police siren ran north. Others, fire and ambulance, followed. Clear and distant they were, as if far away or long ago. In the suddenly cold loft, in the suddenly wide bed, I looked to Sarah to see if she heard. But she was asleep.

Passing Scott’s room on my way to bed I noticed that his door was partly open. At the corner of my eye, a spark flared and was gone when I turned. Outside the windows, nothing stirred on the dark roof tops of Soho.

Sleep was neither quick nor easy. Dreams and memories got entangled. Scott Callendar stared at me, his dark eyes pinned on his pale face. He sang a song of which I remembered the lines,

I drove, sir, in flame, sir

I burned like a match head.

I WOKE UP to a drizzly Sunday morning. Groggy, I put on a robe and staggered to the kitchen. There, Scott whined at his mother, “Then don’t get me anything else. If I don’t get that board, I don’t want your lousy presents!”

“Fine,” Sarah replied, tight-lipped. “Good morning,” she said to me and left to get ready for work.

Scott looked up angrily and asked, “Were you out late?”

“Up late.” It isn’t wise, let alone possible, to lie to a kid. But I felt that was not the moment to discuss the fact that his mother and I had been together again.

I showered and dressed and accompanied Sarah downstairs. The loading docks were bare, the street empty. There were things about her husband and son that I had to tell her and I didn’t know how to start. Mist swirled around the World Trade Towers. She said, “I’m going to miss the Van Man. If I have nothing to worry about, then what am I worried about?”

As I embraced her she told me, “Last night, I dreamed about my husband. Like he comes by to make sure every relationship goes bad. I’ve tried moving forward with my life. I’ve tried looking back. Nothing works.”

That was me, a nothing way of looking back. What I had been going to say stuck in my throat. Sarah grimaced. “I’m sorry, Kevin. Let’s talk later when I feel better.”

Riding back upstairs, I knew I couldn’t stay there. It seemed that all the good spots in the world were taken and that there was no place for me. For the first time in many weeks, I remembered the liquor cabinet, pictured the bottles. Then I got angry at my self-pity and decided to give Mr. Dunn a call.

Instead I opened the loft door and heard Scott in his room singing with a beautiful clear tone. It was a jaunty marching song like “Dixie” or “Yankee Doodle.” Then I picked out the words:

You brought, sir, I bought, sir,  
Drugs that would kill me well.  
But you never said, sir,  
Ice paved my way to hell.

I drove, sir, in flame, sir,  
I burned like a match head.  
And scarce was I dead, sir,  
My bride and you began to play.

In his room, Scott sat on his bed with *A Garland Knot for Children* open in front of him. He ignored me standing in the doorway until I asked, "Where did you learn the tune?"

"Grandma." It seemed we were barely on speaking terms.

"And the new words?"

He held up the book. "They're different each time. It's how my dad talks to me."

"Scott, when I said there was nothing between Sarah and me, that was true." I sounded like a lawyer.

He regarded me with contempt. "My dad's real angry. I told him that it was going to be okay with you and Mom. He didn't believe me. He was right." Holding the book open in my direction, he riffled the pages. They flapped like wings. A bike of bright fire sprang at my face. Its rider's hair was red flame, his face skull white, his eyes two black holes.

Flinching, I backed away. Scott slammed the book shut and we were alone in his room. The remnants of our last game lay on the floor between us. "Get out!" he said. Beneath his anger, I sensed his fear. I was very aware of my own.

"I'll be moving." Not, however, before I tried to finish what I had so stupidly started. "Let's play the Island Game one last time."

Scott glanced around uneasily and muttered, "He doesn't want you here." But when he looked down at his toys, he couldn't resist.

It took just a moment to go to the kitchen and stick the box of matches in my pocket. Before fear and doubt got the better of me, I returned to the room. Scott was already building islands. The book lay open on his bed.

The last game was our most elaborate. Everything, from the wooden Mrs. Noah to plastic dinosaurs, was used. Scott decided to be a drummer boy and I chose to be an Indian chief.

The game itself took over, a most violent expedition. Our ship wrecked itself on the shore. A dragon/brontosaurus attacked a railroad bridge as the train we rode crossed it. As long as I was on the alert, paying attention to my surroundings, all went well.

But in a lull in the action, I remembered Scott Callendar Senior's last night. He had punched Sarah and locked her in the bathroom. When I came by, he was



playing with his son. I wondered if a kind of twisted remorse had brought him blazing back to life.

Suddenly, I was back on the floor of the bedroom. Plastic Indians stood around me like statues and I was no bigger than they. The tiger peeked out from behind a tree. The flaming cycle rounded the corner of a hill and headed right at me. I shook my head, stood up with a cry. I was no longer small. The flaming cycle was gone.

Scott said, "He did stuff like that to get rid of Ian and Frankie. Ian had nightmares. Frankie got hurt trying to roll away." He didn't bother to add that they were assholes.

My advantage over those two was that I knew what I was up against. Our game continued. The elephant was the oracle. It stood on a hill in a grove of trees. It had been scorched again; the trunk and tusks were melted.

"Why did you kill my father?" Scott's question when he reached the grove was simple and direct. The book lay open in his lap. It was like being under the judgment of a god, remote and childlike in his purity.

"It was the ice that killed him. The bike. His own twisted self." Again I spoke weasel words of adulthood. My answer angered the kid. He shook the book. The cycle flashed at the corner of my eyes. It roared behind me.

Quickly, I said, "My turn to ask a question." Hands shaking I pulled out the box and lighted a match. "Do you remember your father that last night?" Scott stared at the match, book frozen in hand. He shook his head.

"Yes, you do. It was in your drawing." The sound of the engine faded. I blew the match out and lighted another. "You were two years old. Your mother was working that night. Remember how your father played with matches? He stood over the crib throwing them so close that you could almost grab them. Each one got nearer. Every one had gone out on the floor. He hadn't yet managed to bum you and he hadn't set fire to the room."

This was rough. Scott was rigid, expressionless as I continued. "To get him away from you, I suggested that he and I take a walk. When I got him outside, he wanted me to ride with him on this motorcycle he had borrowed. I didn't go and I didn't try to stop him. Even though I knew he could be killed. To me it was a choice between losing him and losing you and Sarah. You remember that. It's why you're still afraid of him."

The boy didn't blink. I said, "You have to drop him, Scott. What your father is doing is hurting you. But you know who he's hurting more?" No response. "Your mother. You can't let him do what he's doing to her. He's made her very unhappy."

Do you want that?"

Scott wouldn't look my way. There was an endless pause before he slammed the book shut. Then we both heard an explosion distant but clear. Sirens screamed in the distance. He leaned against me and cried while I thought of ways to explain to Sarah what had happened.

When Scott felt a bit better, we put away the toys. A Garland Knot for Children was nowhere to be found.