

'The God I want to believe in has a voice and
a sense of humour like Denis Johnson's'
Jonathan Franzen



Denis Johnson



JESUS' SON

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Jesus' Son

Stories By Denis Johnson

Editorial Reviews

Amazon.com

The unnamed narrator in Jesus' Son lives through a car wreck and a heroin overdose. Is he blessed? He cheats, lies, steals--but possesses a child's (or a mystic's) uncanny way of expressing the bare essence of things around him. In its own strange and luminous way, this linked collection of short fiction does the same. The stories follow characters who are seemingly marginalized beyond hope, drifting through a narcotic haze of ennui, failed relationships, and petty crime. In "Dundun" the narrator decides to take a shooting victim to the hospital, though not for the usual reasons: "I wanted to be the one who saw it through and got McInnes to the doctor without a wreck. People would talk about it, and I hoped I would be liked." Later he takes his own pathetic stab at violence in "The Other Man," attempting to avenge a drug rip-off but succeeding only at terrorizing an innocent family. Each meandering story--some utterly lacking in the usual elements of plot, including a beginning and an end--nonetheless demands compulsive reading, with Denis Johnson's first calling as a poet apparent in the off-kilter beauty of his prose. Open to any page and gems spill forth: "I knew every raindrop by its name. I sensed everything before it happened. I knew a certain Oldsmobile would stop for me even before it slowed, and by the sweet voices of the family inside that we'd have an accident in the storm."

The most successful stories in the collection offer moments of startling clarity. In "Car Crash While Hitchhiking," for instance, the narrator feels most alive while in the presence of another's loss: "Down the hall came the wife. She was glorious, burning. She didn't know yet that her husband was dead.... What a pair of lungs! She shrieked as I imagined an eagle would shriek. It felt wonderful to be alive to hear it! I've gone looking for that feeling everywhere." In

"Work," while "salvaging" copper wire from a flooded house to fund their habits, the narrator and an acquaintance stop to watch the nearly unfathomable sight of a beautiful, naked woman paragliding up the river. Later the narrator learns that the house once belonged to his down-and-out accomplice and that the woman is his estranged wife. "As nearly as I could tell, I'd wandered into some sort of dream that Wayne was having about his wife, and his house," he reasons. Such is the experience for the reader. More Genet than Bukowski, Denis Johnson lures us into a misfit soul's dream from which he can't awake. --Langdon Cook

L.A. Weekly

"In a world of predictable fiction, Jesus' Son is a point-blank godsend."

New York Times Book Review

"His prose... consistently generates imagery of ferocious intensity, much of it shaded with a menacing, even deranged sense of humor..."

Newsday

"Denis Johnson is an amazingly talented writer, a synthesizer of profoundly American voices..."

New York Times

"...Mr. Johnson...[displays] his dazzling gift for poetic language, his natural instinct for metaphor and wordplay."

USA Today

"These tales are told with apparent carelessness, a kind of grinding realism which would suggest that these events are as purposeless as they seem. But at heart Johnson is a metaphysician, and through the luminous windows that startlingly open in the deadpan prose. . .we are bystanders to an act of testimony."

Los Angeles Times

"Denis Johnson's most accessible and accomplished book, from start to finish, without a single sentence that misses the mark."

Entertainment Weekly

"A work of spare beauty and almost religious intensity."

The Nation

"Reading these stories is like reading ticker tape from the subconscious."

Atlantic Monthly

"...Jesus' Son may eventually be read not...as a distinctive turn in the history of the form..."

People

"Johnson has the distinction of being both a poet and a novelist of gritty realism..."

Book Description

An intense collection of interconnected stories that portray life through the eyes of a young man in a small Iowa town, by the author of *Already Dead: A California Gothic*, *Angels and Resuscitation of a Hanged Man*.

Jesus' Son

Stories By Denis Johnson

A salesman who shared his liquor and steered while sleeping... A Cherokee filled with bourbon ... A VW no more than a bubble of hashish fumes, captained by a college student . . .

And a family from Marshalltown who head-onned and killed forever a man driving west out of Bethany, Missouri . . .

... I rose up sopping wet from sleeping under the pouring rain, and something less than conscious, thanks to the first three of the people I've already named—the salesman and the Indian and the student—all of whom had given me drugs. At the head of the entrance ramp I waited without hope of a ride. What was the point, even, of rolling up my sleeping bag when I was too wet to be let into anybody's car? I draped it around me like a cape. The downpour raked the asphalt and gurgled in the ruts. My thoughts zoomed piti-Jesus' Son I 4

fully. The travelling salesman had fed me pills that made the linings of my veins feel scraped out. My jaw ached. I knew every raindrop by its name. I sensed everything before it happened. I knew a certain Oldsmobile would stop for me even before it slowed, and by the sweet voices of the family inside it I knew we'd have an accident in the storm.

I didn't care. They said they'd take me all the way.

The man and the wife put the little girl up front with them and left the baby in back with me and my dripping bedroll.

"I'm not taking you anywhere very fast," the man said. "I've got my wife and babies here, that's why."

You are the ones, I thought. And I piled my sleeping bag against the left-hand door and slept across it, not caring whether I lived or died. The baby slept free on the seat beside me. He was about nine months old.

. . . But before any of this, that afternoon, the salesman and I had swept down into Kansas City in his luxury car. We'd developed a dangerous cynical camaraderie beginning in Texas, where he'd taken me on. We ate up his bottle of amphetamines, and every so often we pulled off the Interstate and bought another pint of Canadian Car Crash I 5

Club and a sack of ice. His car had cylindrical glass holders attached to either door and a white, leathery interior. He said he'd take me home to stay overnight with his family, but first he wanted to stop and see a woman he knew.

Under Midwestern clouds like great grey brains we left the superhighway with a drifting sensation and entered Kansas City's rush hour with a sensation of running aground. As soon as we slowed down, all the magic of travelling together burned away. He went on and on about his girlfriend. "I like this girl, I think I love this girl—but I've got two kids and a wife, and there's certain obligations there. And on top of everything else, I love my wife. I'm gifted with love. I love my kids. I love all my relatives." As he kept on, I felt jilted and sad: "I have a boat, a little sixteen-footer. I have two cars. There's room in the back yard for a swimming pool." He found his girlfriend at work. She ran a furniture store, and I lost him there.

The clouds stayed the same until night. Then, in the dark, I didn't see the storm gathering. The driver of the Volkswagen, a college man, the one who stoked my head with all the hashish, let me out beyond the city limits just as it began to rain. Never mind the speed I'd been taking, I was too Jesus' Son I 6

overcome to stand up. I lay out in the grass off the exit ramp and woke in the middle of a puddle that had filled up around me.

And later, as I've said, I slept in the back seat while the Oldsmobile—the family from Marshalltown—splashed along through the rain. And yet I dreamed I was looking right through my eyelids, and my pulse marked off the seconds of time. The Interstate through western Missouri was, in that era, nothing more than a two-way road, most of it. When a semi truck came toward us and passed going the other way, we were lost in a blinding spray and a warfare of noises such as you get being towed through an automatic car wash. The wipers stood up and lay down across the windshield without much effect. I was exhausted, and after an hour I slept more deeply. I'd known all along exactly what was going to happen. But the man and his wife woke me up later, denying it viciously. "Oh—no!" "NO!"

I was thrown against the back of their seat so hard that it broke. I commenced bouncing back and forth. A liquid which I knew right away was human blood flew around the car and rained down on my head. When it was over I was in the

Car Crash. I 7

back seat again, just as I had been. I rose up and looked around. Our headlights had gone out. The radiator was hissing steadily. Beyond that, I didn't hear a thing. As far as I could tell, I was the only one conscious. As my eyes adjusted I saw that the baby was lying on its back beside me as if nothing had happened. Its eyes were open and it was feeling its cheeks with its little hands.

In a minute the driver, who'd been slumped over the wheel, sat up and peered at us. His face was smashed and dark with blood'. It made my teeth hurt to look at him—but when he spoke, it didn't sound as if any of his teeth were broken.

"What happened?"

"We had a wreck," he said.

"The baby's okay," I said, although I had no idea how the baby was.

He turned to his wife.

"Janice," he said. "Janice, Janice!"

"Is she okay?"

"She's dead!" he said, shaking her angrily.

"No, she's not." I was ready to deny everything myself now.

whimpered in her sleep. But the man went on shaking his wife.

"Janice!" he hollered.

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His wife moaned.

"She's not dead," I said, clambering from the car and running away.

"She won't wake up," I heard him say.

I was standing out here in the night, with the baby, for some reason, in my arms. It must have still been raining, but I remember nothing about the weather. We'd collided with another car on what I now perceived was a two-lane bridge.

The water beneath us was invisible in the dark.

Moving toward the other car I began to hear rasping, metallic snores. Somebody was flung halfway out the passenger door, which was open, in the posture of one hanging from a trapeze by his ankles. The car had been broadsided, smashed so flat that no room was left inside it even for this person's legs, to say nothing of a driver or any other passengers. I just walked right on past.

Headlights were coming from far off. I made for the head of the bridge, waving them to a stop with one arm and clutching the baby to my shoulder with the other.

It was a big semi, grinding its gears as it decelerated. The driver rolled down his window and I shouted up at him,

"There's a wreck. Go for help."

"I can't turn around here," he said.

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He let me and the baby up on the passenger side, and we just sat there in the cab, looking at the wreckage in his headlights.

"Is everybody dead?" he asked.

"I can't tell who is and who isn't," I admitted.

He poured himself a cup of coffee from a thermos and switched off all but his parking lights.

"What time is it?"

"Oh, it's around quarter after three," he said.

By his manner he seemed to endorse the idea of not doing anything about this. I was relieved and tearful. I'd thought something was required of me, but I hadn't wanted to find out what it was.

When another car showed coming in the opposite direction, I thought I should talk to them. "Can you keep the baby?"

I asked the truck driver.

"You'd better hang on to him," the driver said. "It's a boy, isn't it?"

"Well, I think so," I said.

The man hanging out of the wrecked car was still alive as I passed, and I stopped, grown a little more used to the idea now of how really badly broken he was, and made sure there was nothing I could do. He was snoring loudly and rudely. His blood bubbled out of his mouth with

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every breath. He wouldn't be taking many more. I knew that, but he didn't, and therefore I looked down into the great pity of a person's life on this earth. I don't mean that we all end up dead, that's not the great pity. I mean that he couldn't tell me what he was dreaming, and I couldn't tell him what was real.

Before too long there were cars backed up for a ways at either end of the bridge, and headlights giving a night-game atmosphere to the steaming rubble, and ambulances and cop cars nudging through so that the air pulsed with color. I didn't talk to anyone. My secret was that in this short while I had gone from being the president of this tragedy to being a faceless onlooker at a gory wreck. At some point an officer learned that I was one of the passengers, and took my statement. I don't remember any of this, except that he told me, "Put out your cigarette." We paused in our conversation to watch the dying man being loaded into the ambulance. He was still ab've, still dreaming obscenely.

The blood ran off him in strings. His knees jerked and his head rattled.

There was nothing wrong with me, and I hadn't seen anything, but the policeman had to question me and take me to the hospital anyway. The word

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came over his car radio that the man was now dead, just as we came under the awning of the emergency-room entrance.

I stood in a tiled corridor with my wet sleeping bag bunched against the wall beside me, talking to a man from the local funeral home.

The doctor stopped to tell me I'd better have an X-ray.

"No."

"Now would be the time. If something turns up later ..."

"There's nothing wrong with me."

Down the hall came the wife. She was glorious, burning. She didn't know yet that her husband was dead. We knew.

That's what gave her such power over us. The doctor took her into a room with a desk at the end of the hall, and from under the closed door a slab of brilliance radiated as if, by some stupendous process, diamonds were being incinerated in there. What a pair of lungs! She shrieked as I imagined an eagle would shriek. It felt wonderful to be alive to hear it! I've gone looking for that feeling everywhere.

"There's nothing wrong with me"—I'm surprised I let those words out. But it's always been my tendency to lie to doctors, as if good health consisted only of the ability to fool them.

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Some years later, one time when I was admitted to the Detox at Seattle General Hospital, I took the same tack.

"Are you hearing unusual sounds or voices?" the doctor asked.

"Help us, oh God, it hurts," the boxes of cotton screamed.

"Not exactly," I said.

"Not exactly," he said. "Now, what does that mean."

"I'm not ready to go into all that," I said. A yellow bird fluttered close to my face, and my muscles grabbed. Now I was flopping like a fish. When I squeezed shut my eyes, hot tears exploded from the sockets. When I opened them, I was on my stomach.

"How did the room get so white?" I asked.

A beautiful nurse was touching my skin. "These are vitamins," she said, and drove the needle in.

It was raining. Gigantic ferns leaned over us. The forest drifted down a hill. I could hear a creek rushing down among rocks. And you, you ridiculous people, you expect me to help you.

TWO

I met the first man as I was going home from a dance at the Veterans of Foreign Wars Hall. I was being taken out of the dance by my two good friends. I had forgotten my friends had come with me, but there they were. Once again I hated the two of them. The three of us had formed a group based on something erroneous, some basic misunderstanding that hadn't yet come to light, and so we kept on in one another's company, going to bars and having conversations. Generally one of these false coalitions died after a day or a day and a half, but this one had lasted more than a year. Later on one of them got hurt when we were burglarizing a pharmacy, and the other two of us dropped him bleeding at the back entrance of the hospital and he was arrested and all the bonds were dissolved. We bailed him out later, and still later all the charges against him were dropped, Jesus' Son I 16

but we'd torn open our chests and shown our cowardly hearts, and you can never stay friends after something like that.

This evening at the Veterans of Foreign Wars Hall I'd backed a woman up behind the huge air-conditioning unit while we were dancing, and kissed her and unbuttoned her pants and put my hand down the front of them. She'd been married to a friend of mine until about a year before, and I'd always thought we'd probably get mixed up together, but her boyfriend, a mean, skinny, intelligent man who I happened to feel inferior to, came around the corner of the machine and glowered at us and told her to go out and get in the car. I was afraid he'd take some kind of action, but he disappeared just as quickly as she did. The rest of the evening I wondered, every second, if he would come back with some friends and make something painful and degrading happen. I was carrying a gun, but it wasn't as if I would actually have used it. It was so cheap, I was sure it would explode in my hands if I ever pulled the trigger. So it could only add to my humiliation—afterwards people, usually men talking to women in my imagination, would say, "He had a gun, but he never even took it out of his pants." I drank as much as I could until the western Two Men I 17

combo stopped singing and playing and the lights came up.

My two friends and I went to get into my little green Volkswagen, and we discovered the man I started to tell you about, the first man, sleeping deeply in the back seat.

"Who's this?" I asked my two friends. But they'd never seen him before either.

We got him awake, and he sat up. He was something of a hulk, not so tall that his head hit the roof, but really broad, with a thick face and close-cropped hair. He wouldn't get out of the car.

This man pointed to his own ears and to his mouth, signalling that he couldn't hear or talk.

"What do you do in a situation like this?" I said.

"Well, I'm getting in. Move over," Tom said to the man, and got in the back seat with him.

Richard and I got in the front. We all three turned to the new companion.

He pointed straight ahead and then laid his cheek on his hands, indicating beddy-bye. "He just wants a ride home," I guessed.

"So?" Tom said. "Give him a ride home." Tom had such sharp features that his moods looked even worse than they were.

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Using sign language, the passenger showed us where to take him. Tom relayed the directions, because I couldn't see the man while I was driving. "Take a right—a left here—he wants you to slow down—he's looking for the place—"

and

like that.

We drove with the windows down. The mild spring evening, after several frozen winter months, was like a foreigner breathing in our faces. We took our passenger to a residential street where the buds were forcing themselves out of the tips of branches and the seeds were moaning in the gardens.

He was as bulky as an ape, we saw when he was out of the car, and dangled his hands as if he might suddenly go down and start walking on his knuckles. He glided up the walk of one particular home and banged on the door. A light went on in the second story, the curtain moved, and the light went out. He was back at the car, thumping on the roof with his hand, before I got the thing in gear to pull away and leave him.

He draped himself over the front of my VW and seemed to pass out.

"Wrong house, maybe," Richard suggested. "I can't navigate with him like that," I said. "Take off," Richard said, "and slam on the brakes."

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"The brakes aren't working," Tom told Richard.

"The emergency brake works," I assured everybody.

Tom had no patience. "All you have to do is move this car, and he'll fall off."

"I don't want to hurt him."

We ended it by hefting him into the back seat, where he slumped against the window.

Now we were stuck with him again. Tom laughed sarcastically. We all three lit cigarettes.

"Here comes Caplan to shoot off my legs," I said, looking in terror at a car as it came around the corner and then passed by. "I was sure it was him," I said as its taillights disappeared down the block.

"Are you still all worried about Alsatia?"

"I was kissing her."

"There's no law against that," Richard said.

"It's not her lawyer I'm worried about."

"I don't think Caplan's that serious about her. Not enough to kill you, or anything like that."

"What do you think about all this?" I asked our drunken buddy.

He started snoring ostentatiously.

"This guy isn't really deaf—are you, hey," Tom said.

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"What do we do with him?"

"Take him home with us."

"Not me," I said.

"One of us should, anyway."

"He lives right there," I insisted. "You could tell by the way he knocked."

I got out of the car.

I went to the house and rang the doorbell and stepped back off the porch, looking up at the overhead window in the dark. The white curtain moved again, and a woman said something.

All of her was invisible except the shadow of her hand on the curtain's border. "If you don't take him off our street I'm calling the police." I was so flooded with yearning I thought it would drown me. Her voice broke off and floated down.

"I've got the phone now. Now I'm dialling," she called down softly.

I thought I heard a car's engine somewhere not

too far away. I ran back to the street.

"What is it?" Richard said as I got in.

Headlights came around the corner. A spasm

ran through me so hard it shook the car. "Jesus,"

I said. The interior filled up with light so that for

two seconds you could have read a book. The

shadows of dust streaks on the windshield striped

Tom's face. "It's nobody," Richard said, and the

dark closed up again as whoever it was went past.

Two Men I 21

"Caplan doesn't know where you are, anyway." The jolt of fear had burned all the red out of my blood. I was like rubber. "I'll go after him, then. Let's just have it out."

"Maybe he doesn't care or—I don't know. What do I know?" Tom said. "Why are we even talking about him?"

"Maybe he forgives you," Richard said. "Oh God, if he does, then we're comrades and so on, forever," I said. "All I'm asking is just punish me and get it over with."

The passenger wasn't defeated. He gestured all over the place, touching his forehead and his armpits and gyrating somewhat in place, like a baseball coach signalling his players. "Look," I said. "I know you can talk. Don't act like we're stupid."

He directed us through this part of town and then over near the train tracks where hardly anybody lived. Here and there were shacks with dim lights inside them, sunk to the bottom of all this darkness. But the house he had me stop in front of got no light except from the streetlamp. Nothing happened when I honked the horn. The man we were helping just sat there. All this time he'd voiced plenty of desires but hadn't said a word. More and more he began to seem like somebody's dog.

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"I'll take a look," I told him, making my voice cruel.

It was a small wooden house with two posts for a clothesline out front. The grass had grown up and been crushed by the snows and then uncovered by the thaw. Without bothering to knock I went around to the window and looked in.

There was one chair all by itself at an oval table. The house looked abandoned, no curtains, no rugs. All over the floor there were shiny things I thought might be spent flashbulbs or empty bullet casings. But it was dark and nothing was clear. I peered around until my eyes were tired and I thought I could make out designs all over the floor like the chalk outlines of victims or markings for strange rituals.

"Why don't you go in there?" I asked the guy when I got back to the car. "Just go look. You faker, you loser."

He held up one finger. One.

"What."

One. One.

"He wants to go one more place," Richard said.

"We already went one more place. This place right here. And it was just bogus."

"What do you want to do?" Tom said.

"Oh, let's just take him wherever he wants to

Two Men I 23

go." I didn't want to go home. My wife was different than she used to be, and we had a six-month-old baby I was afraid of, a little son.

The next place we took him to stood all by itself out on the Old Highway. I'd been out this road more than once, a little farther every time, and I'd never found anything that made me happy. Some of my friends had had a farm out here, but the police had raided the place and put them all in jail.

This house didn't seem to be part of a farm. It was about two-tenths of a mile off the Old Highway, its front porch edged right up against the road. When we stopped in front of it and turned off the engine, we heard music coming from inside—jazz. It sounded sophisticated and lonely.

We all went up to the porch with the silent man. He knocked on the door. Tom, Richard, and I flanked him at a slight, a very subtle distance.

As soon as the door opened, he pushed his way inside. We followed him in and stopped, but he headed right into the next room.

We didn't get any farther inside than the kitchen. The next room past that was dim and blue-lit, and inside it, through the doorway, we saw a loft, almost a gigantic bunk bed, in which Jesus' Son I 24

several ghost-complected women were lying around. One just like those came through the door from that room and stood looking at the three of us with her mascara blurred and her lipstick kissed away. She wore a skirt but not a blouse, just a white bra like someone in an undies ad in a teenage magazine. But she was older than that. Looking at her I thought of going out in the fields with my wife back when we were so in love we didn't know what it was.

She wiped her nose, a sleepy gesture. Inside of two seconds she was closely attended by a black man slapping the palm of his hand with a pair of gloves, a very large man looking blindly down at me with the invulnerable smile of someone on dope.

The young woman said, "If you'd called ahead, we would've encouraged you not to bring him."

Her companion was delighted. "That's a beautiful way of saying it."

In the room behind her the man we'd brought stood like a bad sculpture, posing unnaturally with his shoulders wilting, as if he couldn't lug his gigantic hands any farther.

"What the hell is his problem?" Richard asked.

"It doesn't matter what his problem is, until he's fully understood it himself," the man said.

Two Men I 25

Tom laughed, in a way.

"What does he do?" Richard asked the girl.

"He's a real good football player. Or anyhow he was." Her face was tired. She couldn't have cared less.

"He's still good. He's still on the team," the black man said.

"He's not even in school."

"But he could get back on the team if he was."

"But he'll never be in school because he's fucked, man. And so are you."

He flicked one of his gloves back and forth. "I know that now, thank you, baby."

"You dropped your other glove," she said.

"Thank you, babe, I know that, too," he said.

A big muscular boy with fresh cheeks and a blond flattop came over and joined us. I felt he was the host, because he gripped the handle of a green beer mug almost the size of a wastepaper basket with a swastika and a dollar sign painted on it. This personalized touch made him seem right at home, like Hugh Hefner circulating around the Playboy cocktail parties in his pajamas.

He smiled at me and shook his head. "He can't stay. Tammy doesn't want him here."

"Okay, whoever Tammy is," I said. Around these strange people I felt hungry. I smelled some Jesus' Son I 26

kind of debauchery, the whiff of a potion that would banish everything plaguing me.

"Now would be a good time to take him out of here," the big host said.

"What's his name, anyway?"

"Stan."

"Stan. Is he really deaf?"

The girl snorted.

The boy laughed and said, "That's a good one."

Richard punched my arm and glanced at the door, indicating we should go. I realized that he and Tom were afraid of these people; and then I was, too. Not that they'd do anything to us; but around them we felt almost like stupid failures.

The woman hurt me. She looked so soft and perfect, like a mannequin made of flesh, flesh all the way through.

"Let's ditch him—right now," I cried, hurrying out the door.

I was already in the driver's seat, and Tom and Richard were halfway down the walk, before Stan came out of the house. "Lose him! Lose him!" Tom yelled, getting in after Richard, but the man already had a grip on the door handle by the time I'd started pulling away.

I goosed it, but he wouldn't give up. He even managed to keep a slight lead and look around Two Men I 27

right at me through the front window, keeping up a psychotic eye contact and wearing a sarcastic smile, as if to say he'd be with us forever, running faster and faster, puffing out clouds of breath. After fifty yards, as we neared the stop sign at the main road, I really gunned it, hoping to wrench free, but all I did was yank him right into the stop sign. His head hit it first, and the post broke off like a green stalk and he fell, sprawling all over it. The wood must have been rotten. Lucky for him.

We left him behind, a man staggering around a crossroads where a stop sign used to stand. "I thought I knew everyone in town," Tom said, "but those people are completely new to me."

"They used to be jocks, but now they're heads," Richard said.

"Football people. I didn't know they ever got like that." Tom was looking backward, down the road.

I stopped the car, and we all looked back. A quarter mile behind us, Stan paused among the fields in the starlight, in the posture of somebody who had a pounding hangover or was trying to fit his head back onto his neck. But it wasn't just his head, it was all of him that had been cut off and thrown away. No wonder he didn't hear or speak, no wonder he didn't have anything to do

Jesus' Son I 28

with words. Everything along those lines was used up.

We stared at him and felt like old maids. He, on the other hand, was the bride of Death.

We took off. "Never got him to say a word."

All the way back to town, Tom and I criticized him.

"You just don't realize. Being a cheerleader, being on the team, it doesn't guarantee anything. Anybody can take a turn for the worse," said Richard, who'd been a high school quarterback or something himself.

As soon as we hit the city limits, where the chain of streetlamps began, I was back to wondering about and fearing Caplan.

"I'd better just go after him, instead of waiting," I suggested to Tom.

"Who?"

"Who do you think?"

"Will you forget it? It's over. Seriously."

"Yeah. Okay, okay."

We drove up Burlington Street. We passed the all-night gas station at the corner of Clinton. A man was handing money to the attendant, both of them standing by his car in an eerie sulfur light—those sodium-arc lamps were new in our town then—and the pavement around them was spangled with oil stains that looked green, while Two Men I 29

his old Ford was no color at all. "You know who that was?" I told Tom and Richard. "That was Thatcher."

I made a U-turn as quickly as I could.

"So what?" Tom said.

"So this," I said, producing the .32 I'd never fired.

Richard laughed, I don't know why. Tom laid his hands on his knees and sighed.

Thatcher was back in his car by this time. I pulled up to the pumps going the other direction, and rolled down my window. "I bought one of those phony kilos you were selling for two-ten right around last New Year's. You don't know me, because what's-his-name was selling them for you." I doubt he heard me. I showed him the pistol.

Thatcher's tires gave a yip as he took off in his corroded Falcon. I didn't think I'd catch him in the VW, but I spun it around after him. "The stuff he sold me was a burn," I said.

"Didn't you try it first?" Richard said.

"It was weird stuff."

"Well, if you tried it," he said.

"It seemed all right, and then it wasn't. It wasn't just me. Everybody else said so, too."

"He's losing you." Thatcher had hooked very suddenly between two buildings.

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I couldn't find him as we exited the alley onto another street. But up ahead I saw a patch of old snow go pink in somebody's brake lights.

"He's turned that corner," I said.

When we rounded the building we found his car parked, empty, in back of an apartment house. A light went on in one of the apartments, and then went off.

"I'm two seconds behind him." The feeling that he was afraid of me was invigorating. I left the VW in the middle of the parking lot with the door open and the engine on and the headlights burning.

Tom and Richard were behind me as I ran up the first flight of stairs and banged on the door with the gun. I knew I was in the right place. I banged again. A woman in a white nightgown opened it, backing away and saying, "Don't. All right. All right. All right."

"Thatcher must have told you to answer, or you never would've opened the door," I said.

"Jim? He's out of town." She had long black hair in a ponytail. Her eyeballs were positively shaking in her head.

"Get him," I said.

"He's in California."

"He's in the bedroom." I backed her up, moving toward her behind the mouth of the gun.

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"I've got two kids here," she begged.

"I don't care! Get on the floor!"

She got down, and I pushed the side of her face into the rug and laid the gun against her temple.

Thatcher was going to come out or I didn't know what. "I've got her on the floor in here!" I called back toward the bedroom.

"My kids are sleeping," she said. The tears ran out of her eyes and over the bridge of her nose.

Suddenly and stupidly, Richard walked right down the hall and into the bedroom. Flagrant, self-destructive gestures—

he was known for them.

"There's nobody back here but two little kids."

Tom joined him. "He climbed out the window," he called back to me.

I took two steps over to the living-room window and looked down onto the parking lot. I couldn't tell for certain, but it looked like Thatcher's car was gone.

The woman hadn't moved. She just lay there on the rug.

"He's really not here," she said.

I knew he wasn't. "I don't care. You're going to be sorry," I said.

I saw Jack Hotel in an olive-green three-piece suit, with his blond hair combed back and his face shining and suffering. People who knew him were buying him drinks as quickly as he could drink them down at the Vine, people who were briefly acquainted, people who couldn't even remember if they knew him or not. It was a sad, exhilarating occasion. He was being tried for armed robbery. He'd come from the courthouse during the lunch recess. He'd looked in his lawyer's eyes and fathomed that it would be a short trial. According to a legal math that only the mind of the accused has strength to pursue, he guessed the minimum in this case would have to be twenty-five years.

It was so horrible it could only have been a joke. I myself couldn't remember ever having met anybody who'd actually lived that long on the

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earth. As for Hotel, he was eighteen or nineteen.

This situation had been a secret until now, like a terminal disease. I was envious that he could keep such a secret, and frightened that somebody as weak as Hotel should be gifted with something so grand that he couldn't even bring himself to brag about it. Hotel had taken me for a hundred dollars once and I always talked maliciously about him behind his back, but I'd known him ever since he'd appeared, when he was fifteen or sixteen. I was surprised and hurt, even miserable, that he hadn't seen fit to let me in on his trouble. It seemed to foretell that these people would never be my friends.

Right now his hair was so clean and blond for once that it seemed the sun was shining on him even in this subterranean region.

I looked down the length of the Vine. It was a long, narrow place, like a train car that wasn't going anywhere. The people all seemed to have escaped from someplace—I saw plastic hospital name bracelets on several wrists. They were trying to pay for their drinks with counterfeit money they'd made themselves, in Xerox machines.

"It happened a long time ago," he said.

"What did you do? Who did you rip off?"

"It was last year. It was last year." He laughed

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at himself for calling down a brand of justice that would hound him for that long.

"Who did you rip off, Hotel?"

"Aah, don't ask me. Shit. Fuck. God." He turned and started talking to somebody else.

The Vine was different every day. Some of the most terrible things that had happened to me in my life had happened in here. But like the others I kept coming back.

And with each step my heart broke for the person I would never find, the person who'd love me. And then I would remember I had a wife at home who loved me, or later that my wife had left me and I was terrified, or again later that I had a beautiful alcoholic girlfriend who would make me happy forever. But every time I entered the place there were veiled faces promising everything and then clarifying quickly into the dull, the usual, looking up at me and making the same mistake.

That night I sat in a booth across from Kid Williams, a former boxer. His black hands were lumpy and mutilated. I always had the feeling he might suddenly reach out his hands and strangle me to death. He spoke in two voices. He was in his fifties. He'd wasted his entire life. Such people were very dear to those of us who'd wasted only a few years.

With Kid Williams sitting across

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from you it was nothing to contemplate going on like this for another month or two.

I wasn't exaggerating about those hospital name bands. Kid Williams was wearing one on his wrist. He'd just come over the wall from Detox. "Buy me a drink, buy me a drink," he said in his high voice. Then he frowned and said in his low voice, "I come down here for just a short time," and brightening, in his high voice: "I wanted to see you—all!

Buy me one now, because I don't have my purse, my wallet, they took all my money. They thieves." He grabbed the barmaid like a child after a toy. All he was wearing was a nightshirt tucked into his pants and hospital slippers made of green paper.

Suddenly I remembered that Hotel himself, or somebody connected with him, had told me weeks ago that Hotel was in trouble for armed robbery. He'd stolen drugs and money at gunpoint from some college students who'd been selling a lot of cocaine, and they'd decided to turn him in. I'd forgotten I'd ever heard about it.

And then, as if to twist my life even further, I realized that all the celebrating that afternoon hadn't been Hotel's farewell party after all, but his welcome home. He'd been acquitted. His lawyer had managed to clear him on the curious grounds that he'd been trying to defend the com-Out on Bail I 39

munity against the influence of these drug dealers. Completely confused as to who the real criminals were in this case, the jury had voted to wash their hands of everybody and they let him off. That had been the meaning of the conversation I'd had with him that afternoon, but I hadn't understood what was happening at all.

There were many moments in the Vine like that one—where you might think today was yesterday, and yesterday was tomorrow, and so on. Because we all believed we were tragic, and we drank. We had that helpless, destined feeling.

We would die with handcuffs on. We would be put a stop to, and it wouldn't be our fault. So we imagined. And yet we were always being found innocent for ridiculous reasons.

'Hotel was given back the rest of his life, the twenty-five years and more. The police promised him, because they were so bitter about his good luck, that if he didn't leave town they would make him sorry he'd stayed. He stuck it out a while, but fought with his girlfriend and left—he held jobs in Denver, Reno, points west—and then within a year turned up again because he couldn't keep away from her.

Now he was twenty, twenty-one years old.

The Vine had been torn down. Urban renewal had changed all the streets. As for me, my girl-Jesus' Son I 40

friend and I had split up, but we couldn't keep away from each other.

One night she and I fought, and I walked the streets till the bars opened in the morning. I just went into any old place.

Jack Hotel was beside me in the mirror, drinking. There were some others there exactly like the two of us, and we were comforted.

Sometimes what I wouldn't give to have us sitting in a bar again at 9:00 a.m. telling lies to one another, far from God.

Hotel had fought with his girlfriend, too. He'd walked the streets as I had. Now we matched each other drink for drink until we both ran out of money.

I knew of an apartment building where a dead tenant's Social Security checks were still being delivered. I'd been stealing them every month for half a year, always with trepidation, always delaying a couple of days after their arrival, always thinking I'd find an honest way to make a few dollars, always believing I was an honest person who shouldn't be doing things like that, always delaying because I was afraid this time I'd be caught.

Hotel went along with me while I stole the check. I forged the signature and signed it over to him, under his true name, so that he could

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cash it at a supermarket. I believe his true name was George Hodel. It's German. We bought heroin with the money and split the heroin down the middle.

Then he went looking for his girlfriend, and I went looking for mine, knowing that when there were drugs around, she surrendered.

But I was in a bad condition—drunk, and having missed a night's sleep. As soon as the stuff entered my system, I passed out. Two hours went by without my noticing.

I felt I'd only blinked my eyes, but when I opened them my girlfriend and a Mexican neighbor were working on me, doing everything they could to bring me back. The Mexican was saying, "There, he's coming around now."

We lived in a tiny, dirty apartment. When I realized how long I'd been out and how close I'd come to leaving it forever, our little home seemed to glitter like cheap jewelry. I was overjoyed not to be dead. Generally the closest I ever came to wondering about the meaning of it all was to consider that I must be the victim of a joke. There was no touching the hem of mystery, no little occasion when any of us thought—well, speaking for myself only, I suppose—

that our lungs were filled with light, or anything like that. I had a moment's glory that night, though. I was certain Jesus' Son / 42

I was here in this world because I couldn't tolerate any other place.

As for Hotel, who was in exactly the same shape I was and carrying just as much heroin, but who didn't have to share it with his girlfriend, because he couldn't find her that day: he took himself to a rooming house down at the end of Iowa Avenue, and he overdosed, too. He went into a deep sleep, and to the others there he looked quite dead.

The people with him, all friends of ours, monitored his breathing by holding a pocket mirror under his nostrils from time to time, making sure that points of mist appeared on the glass. But after a while they forgot about him, and his breath failed without anybody's noticing. He simply went under. He died.

I am still alive.

I went out to the farmhouse where Dundun lived to get some pharmaceutical opium from him, but I was out of luck.