At the all-male dinner table, the father eats purposefully, cutting his meat with the deft, focused moves of an orthopedic surgeon, which, in fact, he is. “And what, of interest, happened in school today?” he says to the boys, his usual awkward question when their mother is gone. But today isn’t usual. Today an earthquake centered on Illinois rippled north into Michigan.

Danny, blithe and large-hearted, describes the wooden floor in the gym bucking under his feet as he ran the bases. In kickball, a game he loves—in particular the thunk of the softly inflated ball against the toe of his sneaker, how it soared over people’s heads. They went out without their jackets into the parking lot behind the grade school and waited to see if the roof would collapse. It was so cool.

CJ, who sits at the long end of the kitchen table as far from their father as can be managed, wants to say something ironic. Danny is eleven years old, CJ an ancient, dour seventeen. It’s fall, 1968, with the War revving up, not yet unpopular in Midwestern small towns. “I learned,” CJ says, “how to say earthquake in French. What’s cooler than that?”

“Ah,” says their father, his response when there is nothing to quell between the boys, no situation in need of rectifying.

Danny starts laughing. “Where were you, Dad, during the quake—in the operating room?” He laughs more—the image is hilarious!—till his father, no storyteller, tells his own earthquake story. While the room was lurching, he had, in fact, been ligating a vein in the wrist of an elderly man who had an open fracture and couldn’t tolerate prolonged anesthesia. Not knowing how long the quake would last, the team simply waited. Five minutes till everything was still again. Of course they were lucky, but it was more than luck. The father’s face shows against his will a soupçon of pride. “You have to gauge the probabilities,” he says, preparing the boys for future trials of their judgment.
“So you told God to hold off on the aftershocks?” CJ says snidely, though he has no doubts about his father’s competence during an aftershock or any other surprise. The man could probably operate on a raft in the ocean.

But underneath his worldweary-dude veneer, CJ can’t purge himself of the sensation of the earthquake. He was in French class, creating for his own amusement sentences in different verb tenses that professed his love for his best friend, St. John Scully, though he can never, ever tell him. In 1968 in the state of Michigan, sex between men is punishable by fifteen years in jail, life in prison for the second offense. Je t’aime, St. John. Je t’ai aimé depuis que je t’ai vu la première fois. Je voudrais t’embrasser. Je sacrifierais ma vie pour toi ou au moins... I’d sacrifice my life for you or at least a kidney, he penned on a sheet of his loose-leaf notebook paper, while the class wrote responses to a scene from *Le Misanthrope*. Seconds later came a faint, gravelly roar as from a passing train, though no train passed anywhere near. He and his twelve classmates, most of whom he disliked, were rocked in their chairs. Pencils fell from desktops; chalk fell from the chalk tray; the map of France swayed on its hook. Melanie Peterson, newly admitted to Wellesley, early decision, cried out, “Mon dieu, nous sommes perdus!” mocking her possibly genuine fear. The class of seniors, fast-tracked for college, already giddy with their approaching freedom, joined the fun with whatever French expostulations came to mind: “Sacre bleu!” “Quelle horreur!”

CJ couldn’t joke, though. He disliked the unexpected. Something uncontrollable, coiled at the heart of things, had twitched its massive tail. He looked at St. John, who sat across the room with an expression of simple and pure amazement, and CJ loved him more than ever, but still his knee joints felt loose. His teeth wanted to chatter. Students filed outside, filed back in. M. Gifford introduced *tremblement de terre* into the class vocabulary.

Now, in the Walker kitchen, silence and duty reign as he and Danny clear their plates and load the dishwasher. CJ mounts the stairs to his room and sits down at his desk. Outside the window, darkness is blurring the shapes of things, trees, shrubs, lampposts, and CJ sits up straight in his desk chair, trying to bring himself to climax with mental images alone, a feat St. John swore he has accomplished. Unsuccessful, CJ tries to ramp up his mental images, though the problem might be the *tremblements* he can’t quell in the
muscles of his legs. Or maybe it’s the mess of college catalogues at his feet, brochures his father sent away for, that the earthquake must have knocked off their shelf. Or the anti-erotic sounds of classical violin wafting up from downstairs: Their father, who plays as a hobby in the Saugatuck Sinfonietta, is practicing before rehearsal tonight. Dr. Walker: a man who practices before he goes off to practice.

Often on the brink of depression, CJ starts to fall. Their mother is returning tomorrow with Aunt Charlotte, who lost her husband recently and needs to be, right now, with people who love her. Aunt Charlotte is a talker. There will be long dinners where he and Danny sit with napkins on their laps while their father observes their table manners and the sisters discuss people, alive and dead, that only they know. There will be a private mother-son discussion of his feelings, a subject his father, at least, leaves fastidiously alone: Why did he quit the tennis team? She’ll try not to look concerned, but her great fear is that he’s unhappy and she is responsible for it. Her love is a weight he carries. He calls St. John, asks him to come by and hang out—he has a joint they can smoke—but St. John is writing his civics paper. “Why do you bother?” says CJ, who has quit doing homework of all kinds, a protest, though to no end that he can articulate.

“I’m not working that hard on it,” St. John replies.

“Good man,” says CJ and gets off the phone. St. John is kind of a wuss, not that it makes CJ love him less.

With nothing else to do, CJ goes into his parents’ room and checks his father’s stash of condoms—untouched (good man) during his wife’s absence. In the master bathroom he opens the drawer belonging to his mother. Among other tools that serve female beauty is a cache of dramatically named lipsticks. He selects Gypsy Rose and brings it back to his room, where he tries it first on notebook paper, then on the back of his hand. From the wall over the bed a poster image of Mick Jagger gazes down at him—fondly, he’d like to think. Then comes a tap on the door and his father’s over-enunciated English: Would CJ kindly join him downstairs in a game of pool?

There is but one right answer, though a pool game is the usual prelude to a shaming. Dr. Walker, born Wachsberger, has an aura of unassailable correctness that CJ has never been able to undercut. To sustain himself CJ applies the lipstick to his lips,
heavily, unambiguously, a transgression for his father to note and overlook. Try to overlook. It could be interesting.

* * *

The game that ensues in the dark-paneled, Oriental-carpeted game room is standard for them. CJ breaks, shoots till he misses. Better than usual tonight, his lips feeling heavy and moist, he drops three balls in a row before turning the table over.

His father’s hands on the cue stick are precise and urgent, as always. If they belonged to someone else, CJ might have loved them, loose on the stick but in absolute charge—stopping the cue ball dead as its mark hits the pocket. He marvels—at the hands, the stick, the sequence of balls, the locus of force transferred so deftly that the final drop is almost silent. Half a dozen similar nudges and the table is clear. After which his father sets the stick down and delivers the expected coup de grâce. “I need your assistance.”

“Oh dear,” CJ says. “You know how busy I am.”

He eyes his father, who is still wearing the pale gray suit jacket that he wore this morning to the hospital. In half an hour or so, Dr. Walker will drive off to rehearsal in it, fresh and unwrinkled, violin case in hand. The word “dapper” comes to CJ’s mind. Natty. He says extra-casually, “What could anyone do for you that you couldn’t do better yourself?”

The man coughs, which might or might not signal something, and spends the next game courteously—or perhaps evilly—disregarding the fact that his son pokes at the ball without taking aim and that, if he manages to sink something, he drops the cue ball right behind it. CJ has done no egregious wrong but feels that he has and hates his baseless, fathomless guilt, and his father for engendering it, and his own weak will for not casting it off. Meetings with his father are tests of a part of himself that his father wants to destroy, that he must use all his wit and cunning to preserve.

“That’s two peerless victories for you,” CJ says. “Want to go for three?”

His father’s hand rises to his mouth, slow and terrible, like the hand of a drunk faking sobriety. CJ’s pulse speeds up. It’s his personal goal to see his father at a loss. A survivor of Buchenwald, Dr. Walker won’t speak of what happened there. Born Jewish, he
came to America and changed his religion and surname. But even in Buchenwald, the man, as C.J. sees him, can have been in no less control than he is now—slight, pale, starting to lose his hair, but righteous and sure of himself, tapping the floor with the end of his pool cue the way God wanted Moses to tap the rock. Setting the cue down, Dr. Walker casts a glance at his watch and says with the mildness of authentic sobriety, “At some point in our discourse as father and son, you might oblige me with respect. In the meantime, courtesy will do.” He sits down at a leather-topped table, opens a drawer, and takes out a stack of manila envelopes addressed to deans of admissions at various universities. Open but already stamped, each holds a signed check and several pages of questions with the responses typed in. “Since you apparently haven’t found the time yet, I’ve taken the liberty of organizing your college applications. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Looks like you’ve gone beyond organizing.”

The man, of course, lets the remark pass. Back to his normal briskness, he arranges the envelopes in order of preference. On the bottom is Michigan State, where he earned his B.A. and then his M.D. and where C.J. is almost certain of admission. He hands him the top packet. “Please sign by the X.”

Suppressing a roll of the eyes, C.J. scans the sheets that show Princeton University how desirable he is. He has—honest, really—nearly perfect scores on his Scholastic Aptitudes. His extracurricular interests do indeed include tennis, literature, and film. He reads French and speaks decent German. Under the entry Describe an incident that changed your life is a long, single-spaced paragraph, personally typed by his father, no doubt, describing the sports and books that helped him “move on” after the death of his grandfather, who on Sundays drove in from Lansing to play chess with him. C.J. loved his grandfather—his mother’s father—and he still misses him, but he smiles coldly. “I was a sensitive lad.”

His father nods, overlooking the irony. “The most selective schools give considerable weight to the personal essay. It provides an indication—”

“If I’m psycho or not.”

“Not at all. But it will tell them something about your level of maturity. And how adroitly you can express yourself.”

C.J. shakes the page in his hand, trying to banish the word adroitly, which seems to have lodged in his brain. “I didn’t feel that
bad when Grandpa died. It was worse when Adelman moved to Seattle. And I hated Adelman.”

“Do you think your confused anger at the departure of one of your shrink’s will get you into a good college?”

CJ scans the application. “To my knowledge, I do not and have never felt ‘bereft.’” He fans himself with the page. “What are ‘mores’? Like those chocolate marshmallow things you eat around the campfire?”

“Feel free to change it as you see fit. We can retype.”

The man holds out a pen. CJ waves it away. “And why the fuck did you name me Christopher? Why not Jesus, hah! Do you really think people don’t know we’re Jewish? Man, I’m surprised I was circumcised.”

His father’s glance in his direction lasts a bit longer than usual. “Please, Chris. Don’t speak of things that you don’t understand.”

CJ’s angry energy is suddenly gone. He goes through the stack and signs everything Christopher Joseph Walker; although the name is so phony he sees directors of admissions rolling their tired eyes. He considers slipping the U of Michigan letter into the envelope addressed to Michigan State—it would be interesting to see what, if anything, ensues—but any pleasure in the prank sinks in the marsh of his father’s determined serenity. The man is actually humming to himself.

“We want the best place, naturally, for your abilities, which we both know are considerable.”

“Good thing they didn’t ask for a photo.” CJ presses his lipsticked lips together, extends his slim legs.

His father, who has never acknowledged in CJ anything either obnoxious or humorous, nods without looking at him. “You ought to be welcome anywhere you want to go, but it is competitive. Your recommendations will be mixed. Activities are limited, unfortunately. I try to be realistic.”

“Varsity tennis, eleventh grade.”

“You were very good.”

“Danny’s better.”

“What are you talking about? He can’t beat you.”

“In two years he will.”

“You should have continued.”

“I despise tennis.”
A flash of something CJ reads as contempt tightens his father’s mouth. One by one, the man checks the envelopes, tapping over their seals. CJ sits in the brocade chair, banging his heels like a little kid on the carved mahogany legs. He thinks about the paper he isn’t writing, on a feature of the Constitution he believes should be amended. CJ would replace the whole thing with Britain’s system, wherein a vote of no-confidence can raze the castle, bring in new lawmakers. This paper he could write in an hour, at his electric typewriter, in a single, adroit draft. Then he notices the absence of his father’s favorite school from among the applications. In an exaggerated Boston accent he says, “Where’s Harvard?,” pronouncing it *Hab-vad*. “Aren’t I Harvard material?”

His father’s eyes close, then open again. “Do you know how many senior class presidents will be applying to Harvard? Boys who play football and volunteer to help needy people and still earn their As?”

“Isn’t there a chance? Or aren’t I adroit enough?”

“I don’t know. Is it what you want?”

His father sounds suspicious but hopeful, but CJ is on a roll. “Harvard or nowhere. Harvard or the U.S. Navy. Join the Navy and see the world. Harvard or”—a brilliant idea strikes him—“a kibbutz in Yis-ra-el!” He grabs one of the envelopes, addressed to a school that isn’t Harvard, and tears it down the middle. Deliberately. With dignity. His father sucks his cheeks in.

“If you wanted to go to Harvard you should have followed my advice at the beginning of high school.” He looks off into a corner. His eyes, nose, and mouth are small and fine-looking and give the impression of letting one another discreetly alone. “Well, who knows? We’ll send for an application. As people say, it’s only money.”

“Ha, fooled you!” cries CJ. “Fuck Harvard. Who wants to go anyfuckingwhere?”

His father stands, pushes his chair against the table, stacks the rest of the envelopes, and sets off with them across the room. “Please control yourself.”

“I have control! I have total control! It was a waste to fill out those stupid forms! Really, since one of these days, believe me, I’m going to kill myself. Adroitly! So, you can tear up those checks.”

CJ tosses the speech like a kick at his father’s retreating back. But when the man turns, gazing full upon him with an open,
sad, vulnerable face, CJ’s arms reach out. Part of him labels the
gesture stupid, pointless, humiliating, inane. Like he needs a hug?
But for a moment in the middle of the game room, he sways back
and forth, arms extended like the leaves of a plant on the verge of
animal movement. Evolving.

“CJ, your mother would be upset if she heard you talking
like this.”

He could cry now. He is supposed to cry. The thought helps
him rein himself in. “She’s given up on me.” It comes out less wry
than he intended, but he plunges on. “Danny’s her one hope. Her
last, best hope.”

His father’s mouth compresses, as if he’s just bitten down
on something hard. Then his hand gives a slightly absentminded
wave. “Keep this up and we’ll have to call Dr. Lowe.”

CJ closes his eyes until the tears go back to wherever they
came from. He rocks for a moment in the wake of his father’s leav-
ing. Then he addresses himself to the game of pool with a hypoth-
esis to test: Will he play better with his father gone?

* * *

He is racking the balls when Danny walks in, nodding his
usual universal approval of everything. “Play me, brother?”

CJ squints along the cue, banks a stripe into a side pocket.
“Are you dressed appropriately?”

“I want to play with my clothes on, okay? Mom could come
back anytime.”

“Mom’s in New Jersey. Do you know how far away that is?”

“There’s Dad.”

“Rehearsing, 8 to 10. Strip, sonny. And chalk your cue.”

CJ sinks two—clip, clip. In neutral, cleansed of feeling, inca-
pable of error, he observes Danny forsake his reluctance. Danny
is often unforgivably stupid, but sometimes the light of courage
shines from his face. The boy wriggles out of his t-shirt, unsnaps
his jeans. Goosebumps raise a patch of hair on top of CJ’s head.
“Hold up, boy. Change of plan. Every miss we take something off,
you and me both. How’s that, brother of mine?”

Danny considers the new game, resnapping his pants without
self-consciousness. “How about this? When you sink one, I take
something off and vice versa?”
“You got it.”

Grinning, Danny rams his head back through the neck of his shirt. “Sometimes men take off their clothes and women watch. There are places!”

“Who says?”

Danny’s eyes shine. CJ feels slightly sick. It’s frightening how easy it is to make his brother happy. No one should be so exposed and vulnerable—it puts the burden on everyone else. On the other hand, Danny genuinely loves the game of pool. He can play down here for hours, angling balls off the table walls. And recently Danny beat him for the first time, sinking perfect ball after ball in his birthday suit, with the grace of a little baby Greek god.

Tonight Danny promises to be as good. His break-sinks one and sets up a second. CJ removes his watch, a shoe. He feels the burn of adrenaline; he’ll have to work now. When Danny misses shot number three, CJ takes command and manages to relieve his brother of both shoes and his Batman ring. The game proceeds with equivalent successes and failures until one ball remains on the table, along with the cue and the eight. The boys, six years apart, are both barefoot in their jockey shorts. “Gerald and Rupert,” says CJ—not that Danny will understand. The boy is giggling.

“Hey, you’re wearing lipstick.”

“So it would seem,” CJ replies, but his voice rings highbrow and phony like his father’s.

CJ wonders then what would happen if Dad came back early and walked downstairs. And what would their mother say? We’re sick, he says to himself, soothed by the “we,” the league of him and brother Danny. In league.

He is still in charge, although uneasily. Danny’s last miss lined up the balls, but they were at the far end of the table, a setup if his arms were six inches longer. He calls the corner pocket, stands on tiptoe, reaching for the angle he can see as if traced out on the green baize. Then behind him comes the breath of a giggle. He turns to find the chalked tip of Danny’s cue stick pointing at his butt. Danny is laughing like an idiot. CJ grabs the stick and flings it across the room. “Fetch!”

Danny covers his mouth; giggles spill out between his fingers.

“Go and get it,” CJ says. “Not like that. Like a dog! Fetch, Rover!”
Still laughing, Danny drops to his hands and knees and makes his way around the pool table. The boy sometimes gets like this, so silly it destabilizes the kingdom, and CJ has to find new ways to restore order. He watches Danny crawling back with the long stick between his jaws, trying to keep it from hitting the wall or a table leg. It falls; Danny labors to pick it up with his teeth, without using his hands. He doesn’t cheat. Spittle drips down his chin. CJ’s heart is beating crazily. In the way-back of his mind eyes narrow on him with disapproval, but the game is in charge now. He tilts the stick against the wall and pats his brother’s doggie head. “Good dog. Good lad.”

Having reestablished his authority, CJ draws back his own stick again. But when he tries to hit the ball, the cue stick won’t move. Danny has taken hold of the stick’s rosewood butt. His fist is closed tight around it. Danny squeaks with hilarity.

“You know, boy, we have sanctions for such as you, who dishonor the Great Chain of Being.”

CJ’s voice is uninflected, his expression blank, an absorbent surface for childish amusement. After a fraught moment, Danny drops to his knees as CJ taught him. “I’m sorry, Majesty.”

“Do you deserve forgiveness, earthworm?”

“I sincerely hope so, Lord of the Planet.”

CJ checks for irony in his brother’s sweet-voiced delivery.

“You are without redeeming facet.”

“I know that, Lord.”

Rising to his feet, Danny bows from the waist and steps back. CJ sinks the shot. Without a word of complaint Danny removes his jockey shorts. CJ watches the boy’s lower body emerging from his clothing, the small globes of his butt white as marble below his sturdy brown back. On an impulse, CJ drops his own shorts, exposing his body, its lean, neat muscles. He and Danny are equal now—naked, proud young gladiators. “Beautiful,” says CJ. “Gerald and Rupert!”

“Who?”

He tells Danny about the two main male characters in *Women in Love*, who love their girlfriends and each other as well. In his favorite scene the men wrestle in the library in front of the fireplace. “On a polar bear rug in front of a fire,” he says. “I might have made it up, the rug part, but it’s a powerful scene. By a guy I want you to start reading. D. H. Lawrence.”
“Was he a homo?”
“You schmuck! What’s the matter with you? Just because you love men doesn’t mean you’re a homo!”
“Do they marry their girlfriends? What happens in the end?”
“One of them gets married.”
“What about the other one?”
“Read the book and find out.”

After winning the game, easily now, CJ would have liked to rest in the fullness of Danny’s trust in him. But as they start to dress CJ is struck by a new game idea. “This time,” he tells Danny, “whoever drops his called shot gets to make a command and the other has to obey. Both of us.”

“You’ll do whatever I say?”
“Yup. Even-Steven.”
“In our clothes?”
“Jockeys,” says CJ.
“But you can’t make me clean your room.”
“I promise,” says CJ.


After a brief hesitation Danny orders CJ to get down on his hands and knees and bark three times. CJ complies, emitting three sharp barks and a fourth for good measure. “That’s it?”

Danny nods, warily, but when his next shot goes in, he directs CJ to skip around the room with his hands on his hips. After the circuit CJ is to curtsey before him and say, *I am a sugarplan fairy.*

“Is that *fairy* as in *fag,* Master?” says CJ. Danny screams with laughter.

“Come on. Just do it!”

CJ does it fast, the small shame passing quickly up and out of him, like a burp. Danny applauds, eyes watering. His face is red. He’s giggling hard, almost choking. Then he misses, and CJ sinks his shot; CJ is in charge again.

Now that the scepter of government is back where it belongs, CJ is aware of his brother without looking at him—sturdy and handsome, at eleven nearly as tall as he is. He has a square chin, a
good chest for his age. He looks like their mother, who is as tall as their father and prettier than their father is handsome. When they grow up Danny will be taller by far. CJ is struck, then, by a staggeringly adroit thought. “Go up to Mom’s closet and bring down a dress.”

Danny looks at him.

“Something fancy. And a brassiere. The Kommandant commands you.”

“She won’t like that.”

“Go, boy-o. You know what happens to people who go back on their word. Bring down some of her makeup too. It’s in the bathroom.”

Danny returns with a lipstick, a brassiere, and a white sleeveless summer dress with a narrow belt and a zipper in the back. “It’s time to get dressed,” says CJ. “You have a dinner date. The bra goes on first.”

Danny holds the item at arm’s length, as if gauging the scope of his transgression. CJ thinks only of the power he has acquired, whose bounds he has yet to ascertain. The bra being ridiculously large on Dan, CJ tosses it aside, then helps his brother into the dress and zips it up. It’s loose but improves with the belt cinched. The hem falls mid-calf. CJ’s heart is knocking around his chest. “You’re looking good,” he says, “but a woman can’t go out without her makeup.” He applies lipstick to his brother’s lips, smears a bit on his cheekbones.

The transformation astounds CJ. Danny’s dark hair curls over the top of his ears. His face is smooth and hairless. In a hat and earrings he’d look like a beautiful young girl. The boys breathe shallowly, the only sound the furnace’s clicking on. “Danielle,” he says, “you’re gorgeous! You should look in a mirror!”

Danny will not look in any mirror. Feeling weak in the knees, CJ is ready at last for the game to end. He hops back into his jeans, then brings Danny’s clothes over to the table, beside which Danny stands in the dress, seemingly paralyzed except for the rapid chuff of his breathing. CJ unzips him. “You did good, son.” CJ nods in support of his encouraging statement and pulls his own shirt back on. “You were willing; that’s what counts. You get a high pass.” He tries to smile.

“Don’t call me Danielle.” Danny’s teeth are chattering.

“I won’t,” CJ says gently and hands him his shirt.
When they are both fully clothed, they stand beside the pool table, but Danny won’t look at him. Something is wrong but CJ can’t quite fathom it. He feels generous toward his brother. And loving, like an elder sibling ought to feel. He hands Danny his own sock, to clean his face with. “I know what you’re thinking,” he says. “You forgot we were playacting.”

Danny is trembling. And CJ, too, now. His breath lurches up his lungs and out of his mouth. Before tonight he felt Dan’s attachment to him, but not its depth. Something is wrong that he must make right. CJ pulls back his narrow shoulders, straightens his spine, pushes his chest out against the fabric of his t-shirt. “Pay attention, Danny. If something like this ever comes up again, with me or with anyone else, if you don’t want it to happen you don’t let it, do you hear me? If someone tries to fuck with you, you have my permission to cut off their balls. Do you know what I’m saying?”

Danny swallows. “Am I a homo now?”


Danny nods.

“Tell me. I don’t know you know till you tell me. Tell me what you are.”

Danny declares his manhood.

“Let’s shake.”

The boys shake hands, then Danny puts his arms around him, burying his head in CJ’s chest. “Cut it out, Dan.” The boy lets go immediately; CJ pats his back. “It’s cold in here. Who turned on the air conditioner?” He ruffles his brother’s hair, thick and soft as fur. “Danny, don’t love me so much.”

Danny smiles like an angel. “Who said I loved you at all?”

“That’s the idea!”

They walk upstairs together, CJ carrying the female garments. In front of Dan’s room, CJ takes him by the shoulders and keeps hold, grinning to still the quiver of his lower lip. “That’s what I like to hear. You stand on your own in this world. Say it, brother.”

“Right. But there’s a lot of stuff we’re going to do together.”

“Sure. For sure.” CJ leans on the doorframe.

“Like what?” Danny says.

“I don’t know. Like what? Fishing? Hunting?”
“Yes! And getting high together!”
“We’ll get high and rob banks. How about that, Danny Boy?”
“We’ll be spies for the CIA. I’ll be a spy and you’ll be a coun-
terspy!”

On an impulse too strong to suppress, CJ kisses the top of his brother’s head.

Back in his own room CJ begins shaking again. For some reason he can’t look in the dresser mirror, though it’s something he often does to calm himself down. It’s as if his body is the earth in the throes of a quake that won’t stop; the fault is bottomless. No ground for the measureless seething plate to find rest. In CJ’s heart or gut is a very bad feeling and he doesn’t know its name.

The phone starts ringing, but he doesn’t pick up. On the wall Mick Jagger is looking at him as if he has his number. Who is this creep?, Jagger is thinking. But what has he, CJ, done? Nothing happened! The ringing continues, but he’s not ready to talk, not even to St. John. On his desk a copy of Women in Love is open to the chapter in which Gerald lies down in the snow and freezes to death. Under the weight of Jagger’s condemning gaze, CJ lies down in his bed. He hasn’t hurt anybody, so why does he feel bad? Jagger’s no angel.

CJ is arguing with imaginary Mick Jagger on the place of evil in the universe when the phone starts up again. It’s his mother, wanting to talk to his father. No good reason, she says, since she’s coming back tomorrow, but she just missed him. And all of them. She apologizes for calling so late but she forgot about the rehearsal. “Get some sleep,” she says. “Don’t worry so much. I’ll see you tomorrow. I love you.”

Hanging up, CJ feels tears in his eyes. Before they can fall he calls St. John. “How about this—let’s just get out of here. Leave everything. We’ll head out to the territories, like Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer, though there aren’t any more territories. We’ll go to California. San Francisco. The Haight! I’ll pick you up in thirty minutes,” he says, adding, nonsensically, “There are serious earth-
quakes in California.”

“What the fuck, man? What’s going on?”

His friend wants no part of any trip to California. When CJ tells him he loves him, St. John giggles like a dodo, then after a pause hangs up the phone.
Now it seems to CJ that he has no choice, that what he has been avoiding and fearing all his conscious life must come to pass. It’s almost ten o’clock this cold and dark November night. Danny has gone right to sleep, his cheek to his ancient, hairless stuffed dog. In the master bedroom their mother’s vacancy is marked by a biography of John Kennedy, who would have made the world right if he had lived, their mother said. CJ used to love her like crazy. Now he forgives her for preferring Danny. The world in general prefers Danny, and why not?

He hangs up her linen dress and selects another—black, sequined, long-sleeved, of a stretchy fabric he can maybe squeeze into. He finds clip-on earrings, a pretty diamond watch, a beaded handbag, a pair of high heels. She’s a large woman, his height, with feet as long as his and nearly as wide.

Back in his bedroom he puts on the dress. It’s tight in the arms and waist, but hey: black is forgiving. Now, where did he hear that? He clips on the earrings, fastens the watch to his wrist, reapplies the lipstick, rubs some on his cheeks—quickly, before his father gets home. He stows the tube in the handbag and combs his dark wavy hair, longer than Danny’s, it seems, then he walks downstairs in the high heels, back straight, chin up, handbag dangling from the crook of his arm, holding onto the banister to lighten his tread. In the hall mirror he sees a female face, and he is halted a moment, trying to fathom its connection with him, till he’s no longer sure what he isn’t sure of. By his mother’s watch there are five minutes until his father’s return. His father is always on time.

It’s cold outside in November in Michigan, but he settles himself on the top step of the porch at the apex of the family’s driveway before it rounds the bend to the garage. Light from the lanterns on both sides of the door shines on the toes of his shoes, his sequined legs, the beaded bag on his lap, and maybe even his lipsticked lips, which he purses, then widens into a glamorous smile. I feel pretty / Oh so pretty . . . .

It’s only small-town Michigan, but earthquakes, he knows, can occur here. His teeth start to chatter, and he wraps his arms around himself, awaiting between terror and hope the man who will either love him or kill him.